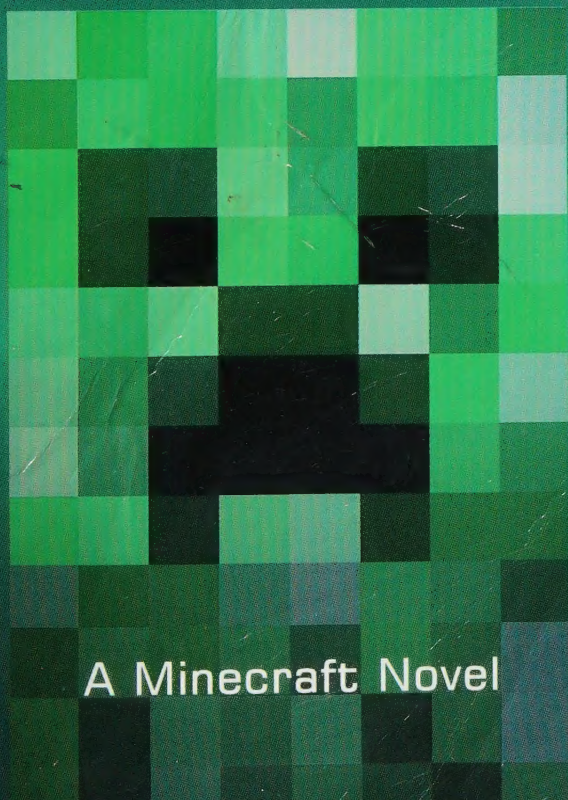
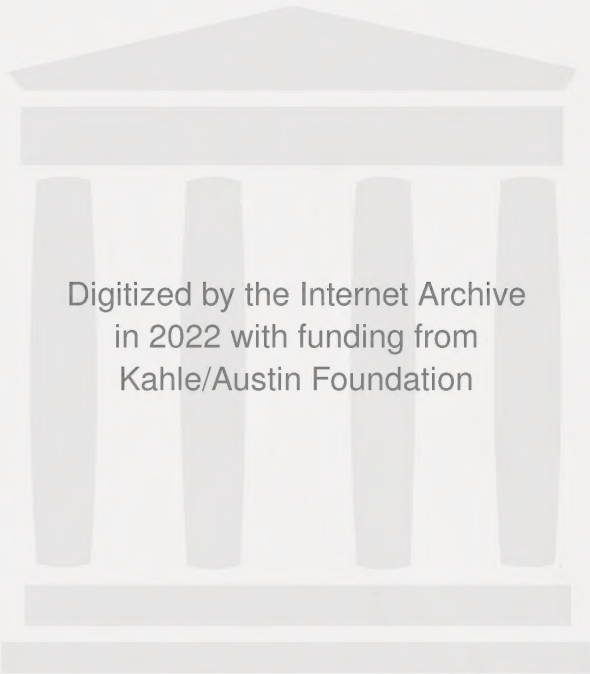


Karl Olsberg

Back into the Cubeworld



A Minecraft Novel



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A Minecraft Novel

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What is 'real'? How do you define 'real'?

- Morpheus

For Leopold

Thanks to Leopold for his helpful suggestions and for pointing out many errors. Thanks to Elizabeth Smith for turning my draft translation into readable English. Thanks to all of you who wrote to me and encouraged me to write this sequel. I hope I can match your expectations.

Please send your opinions and comments to
karlolsberg@gmail.com or join me on
facebook.com/cubeworldnovel.

"Don't you think you should rather stay home for another couple of days?" Concerned, Mom looks at me. "You're still quite pale."

"I'm feeling fine!" I smile, trying to cover up for the fact that I'm still a little wobbly on my legs. When you've been lying in a coma for four weeks, that's quite normal, I guess. But nothing in the world could keep me from going to school today, now that Amely is back.

While I was still in the hospital, she had gone with her mom to visit her grandparents, who live in a small town somewhere in the mountains. "She needs me now," Amely told me, and I just nodded like it didn't bother me not to see her for two long weeks. We texted each other every day, sometimes for hours, but that's not quite the same.

"You're so brave! I'm very proud of you, my son!" Mom kisses me good-bye. That isn't the same, either.

A cold rain washes the tiredness from my face. It's good to be awake! My school is less than a mile from my home. While I walk through the familiar streets, my mind goes back to the strange world that I was trapped in.

So far, I haven't told anyone about my adventures. Not even Amely. I didn't want her to think I'm crazy. Besides, she never played Minecraft, so she has no idea what creepers and endermen are. But now I wish I could share my memories with someone. It still feels so real, as if I'd been actually there: lost on a beach in a world made of cubes, chased by skeletons in a dark cave, puzzled in a room full of levers, awestruck in front of the throne of Death himself, frightened to the bone in the hall of the Wither, desperate on the back of the Enderdragon.

Since I left the hospital, I haven't played on the computer. I don't really know why. Maybe I was afraid that my favorite game wouldn't be any fun anymore, after I experienced it for real. Or probably I just wanted to live a plain old boring real life for a while - I've had more than my fill of excitement and adventures for the time being.

As I approach the schoolyard, I suddenly get the jitters. What should I say to Amely? Just hello? Isn't that a little formal, after what happened? Should I kiss her?

We kissed each other after I awoke from the coma. But what if she only did that out of gratitude, because I had saved her from her evil stepfather? Maybe she was bored while we chatted for hours? Really, why should a girl like her be interested in a guy like me? Maybe she just wants us to be friends.

My heart beating in my throat, my head empty, I enter the schoolyard. The first one I meet is my best friend, Kaden.

"Marco! Boy, you've scared us all a lot!"

I'd love to tell him that I have been scared a lot, too. If I talked about nether fortresses and ghastrs, he'd understand me. We've spent a lot of time together on Minecraft servers. He'd be amazed if he knew how I was once lying on an altar, surrounded by chanting zombie pigmen. But I'm not ready to talk about it yet.

While we walk toward the main building, I scan the schoolyard. Amely is nowhere to be seen. Maybe she's already inside. She's in a parallel class, so I'll have to wait until recess.

First period is biology, with Mrs. Poulson. Normally, she's very strict, and we don't like her very much. But when she sees me, she comes over and asks me how I am. I

try to give the impression that a coma is nothing more than an extended nap.

Everyone is very nice to me. They tell me that the whole class went to the hospital and saw me staring blankly at the ceiling. Some of the girls cried. Now they behave like I've been raised from the dead. I'd prefer if they made jokes about it: "Did you sleep well, Marco?" or "Just two more big naps until Christmas!"

At recess, I spill out onto the schoolyard with all the others, but there's no trace of Amely. Maybe she's coming late to school for some reason, or her first lessons have been canceled. Disappointed, I text her a message, but she doesn't reply.

The knot in my stomach tightens. My thoughts run wild: She's staying away on purpose. She's afraid to see me. She's too scared to tell me that she doesn't want to be with me. Then: Something happened to her. The thought hits me like an electric shock. I imagine how her stepfather could have broken out of prison and driven to her grandparents' house to take his revenge.

On the schoolyard, I spot a group of girls from Amely's class. When I ask them about her, they just shrug.

"Maybe she's ill," one of them says.

When we chatted last time, around noon yesterday, Amely didn't write anything about feeling sick, only that she had to catch the train, and that she was looking forward to going back to school.

"What's wrong with you?" Kaden asks.

I didn't even notice him approaching. What can I tell him? That I'm in love, and worried about my girlfriend? No one knows that we're a couple (if we really are). I'm not

about to change that; I'm not interested at all in being the subject of school gossip. So I just shrug.

"You're a bit pale," Kaden observes. "Maybe you should stay home for a few more days."

"I'm okay."

"What were you talking to Rebecca about?"

"Doesn't matter," is all I can think of as a reply.

Kaden raises an eyebrow. But before he can dig deeper, he's distracted by a commotion on the schoolyard.

"Show it, I said!" That's the voice of Tiny. We call him that because his surname is Tinner and he's not exactly a giant, although at fifteen, he's the oldest in our class. Nobody mentions his nickname when he's around, though. What he's lacking in size, he makes up for with meanness. Then there are his two buddies who follow him everywhere like loyal dogs. One of them is called "Hulk" for a reason. The other is only mean when he's around Tiny; alone, he's a total wimp.

I don't know the name of the victim they've picked today. He's a boy of twelve or thirteen years with olive skin and black, curly hair.

"It's none of your business!"

"No one but me decides what my business is," Tiny claims. "Now, show it to me!"

"No!"

"All right, if you won't give it to me voluntarily, I have to take it. Hulk, grab him!"

The boy tries to get away, but for his size Hulk is surprisingly quick. Tiny reaches toward a silver amulet hanging on a chain around the neck of his desperately struggling prey. I look around. No teacher to be seen. A few

older students stand there, watching the quarrel but not interfering.

Kaden guesses what I'm thinking.

"Keep out of it!" he murmurs. "You know what happens if you mess with those guys."

Tiny yanks at the amulet. The boy struggles and kicks, but can't overcome Hulk's powerful grip.

"No! That's mine!"

"What have we got here?" Tiny asks as he opens the small, round silver amulet. "Oh, how sweet! Is that your little girlfriend?" He sniggers.

The boy is out of his mind with rage. His eyes grow very big, almost popping out of their sockets.

"That's my mother, you stinking jerk. She died when I was three years old!"

Tiny freezes. "You'll regret that!" he hisses. "Nobody calls me a jerk unpunished! I will ..."

Suddenly, the schoolyard becomes silent. There is a strange pressure on my ears. I feel dizzy and black out for a moment.

When I can see again, the world has changed. The school is still there - a large lump of concrete. But somehow it appears less defined, and at the same time more smooth and even than before. The trunk of the big chestnut tree beside the entrance now is a rectangular prism. Its crown is made of green, spotted cubes. People with colorful rectangular bodies scurry around me. I myself wear shiny, bluish armor and am holding a sword made of the same material.

Oh no, please! Not again!

Stunned, I stare at a boxy guy in light blue shirt and dark blue trousers, who is being attacked by three green-

skinned goons in ripped-up clothes. The zombies claw at him with their arms, emitting angry *unnghs*.

I shake my head in despair, trying to dispel the illusion. But the schoolyard remains changed. I don't know how and why, but I'm back in the Cubeworld! Was Mom right? Should I have stayed home? Did I fall into another coma right here in the middle of the schoolyard?

Blind rage fills me. This can't be! This mustn't be! Not today, when I was finally going to see Amely again!

The zombie hallucinations continue to beat up the poor guy. My anger focuses on them. I'm really fed up with zombies! I hit them with my diamond sword, until a few pieces of rotten meat are the only things left of the two of them, while the third flees.

"Marco! Gosh, what's wrong with you?"

I feel sick, and black out again. As my senses come back, the schoolyard looks as before. Well, almost.

Tiny is lying on the ground, staring at me with wide-open eyes, as if he is afraid of me. Blood dribbles from his nose. Hulk stands bent over, holding his stomach. The wimp is talking excitedly to a teacher, pointing at me. Both of them approach me.

The boy with the amulet regards me with a mixture of gratitude and dismay.

"Thank you!" he says. "But you didn't have to go off like that, you know!"

I turn toward Kaden, who has gone pale.

"That ... that was bad, dude," he says. "That was really bad!"

2.

Ten minutes later, I'm standing before the principal's desk. Beside me are Tiny and his friends and the boy with the amulet, whose name is Kasim. The teacher who dragged me here has placed himself beside the office door, as if to prevent our escape.

The principal regards me through his thick, black spectacles. "Marco, right?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Are you aware, Marco, that you are guilty of a serious misdemeanor, which can be punished with expulsion from school?"

I don't know how to answer that. I don't know anything at all. I can barely prevent myself from breaking into tears.

"We can't tolerate violence against other students, whatever the reason!" The principal's voice is like that of a judge who's about to convict a murderer.

"That's true!" Tiny interjects. "He attacked me for no reason!" He shows the bloody tissue he has pressed to his face. "He could have broken my nose!"

Hulk says nothing. He looks like he's embarrassed that a skinny guy like me was able to take him out.

"What were you thinking?" the principal asks. "So far, you've never showed any signs of violence against others!"

What can I say? That I mistook Hulk for a zombie? That I thought I was lying on the ground in a coma? If I tell them what I believed happened, they'll put me into a hospital right away.

"He only wanted to help me," Kasim says. "Those three tried to take away my amulet. It is the only keepsake I have from my mom."

"That's not true!" Tiny protests. "I just wanted to take a look at it! Honestly, sir!"

"That's right," the wimp agrees like a parrot. "He just wanted to take a look at it! Honestly!"

"I don't care why you did it, Marco - we can't tolerate violence in our school. You are old enough to be legally responsible for your actions. As you know, assault is a crime. I will talk to Mrs. Tinner in the hopes that she won't take legal action against you. I'll talk to your mother as well. Now I want you to go home. In the meantime, I'll think about what punishment is appropriate for you."

I nod and go back to the classroom in a daze. Everybody is staring at me as I take my belongings and leave without a word.

I don't care that I've been sent home on my first day at school. I'm not afraid of the punishment. What I'm really scared of is what happened to me in the schoolyard.

If only I could talk to Amely! But she still doesn't answer her phone, and doesn't reply to my texts.

When Mom gets home from work, I tell her everything. She doesn't scold me. Instead, she takes me in her arms.

"I knew it was too early to send you to school," she says. "Now please tell me, what on earth happened?"

I've no idea, is the first answer that comes to my mind. Instead, I tell her how Tiny and his bullies hassled Kasim.

"I interfered, there was a brawl, and I flipped out," I say, ending my description. "Then I don't know. Suddenly, I was so incredibly angry. I can't remember what I did until the fight was over."

She looks at me, concerned. "The principal said you hit one of the other pupils so hard that he was bleeding. According to him, you were extremely brutal." She shakes

her head. Her eyes are shiny with tears when she says, "I don't understand it. You've never been violent before. I didn't even think that you were a strong fighter. And now you pick a fight with three opponents!"

I look down. All I can remember is that I was wearing diamond armor and had a diamond sword - with that kind of equipment, three zombies are not much of a problem.

She wipes away a tear from the corner of her eye, smiling crookedly. "In a way, I'm proud of you! You stood up for another, weaker boy. Just be a little more careful next time, okay? You don't need to beat them up until they bleed!"

"Yes, Mom." I go to my room and lie down on my bed. For a while, I stare at the poster of my favorite rock band, and at the picture of the creeper beside it. Even though the corners of his mouth are pulled down, he seems to look at me compassionately.

What's wrong with me? The question runs through my head like a swarm of angry hornets. But I can't find an answer.

Later, the principal calls and tells Mom that he talked to Tiny's mother, who will refrain from suing me. I will get an official reprimand, but in view of the "special circumstances" (he's apparently referring to my coma) there won't be any further punishment. I can go back to school tomorrow, if Mom thinks it's all right.

Of course Mom doesn't think so, but I beg until she finally gives in. I'm not even sure myself why I want to go back to school so desperately. Maybe because I still hope to see Amely, although she hasn't answered any of my attempts to contact her. Then again, maybe I just want to prove to myself that the incident this morning was just a

slip of my mind, an aftereffect of my coma. It won't happen again. After all, I'm not insane, am I?

Something is different when I go to school the next day. I can't really explain it, but I've got the feeling that the other students are glancing at one another when I'm not looking. They probably see me as a monster, a murderous bully, one nobody wants to have anything to do with. At least, that's what I think until Anne approaches me in first recess, accompanied by two of her friends, who look at each other and giggle all the time.

"You're good at math, Marco, aren't you?" she asks.

Baffled at her attention, I look at her. There's consensus among the boys that Anne is by far the most beautiful girl in our class. She has long, golden hair and eyes that shine as blue and deep as the summer sky. I want to clarify that these are not my words, but Kaden's. Up until now, however, Anne has done nothing at all to acknowledge his existence, let alone mine.

"Math? I'm okay, I guess. Why?"

"Maybe you could take a look at my homework? I didn't quite finish it yesterday, and you know how Mr. Hawker is." She smiles, while her friends giggle as if she told a joke.

"I haven't done my homework either, I'm afraid. I was ... ill."

"I know. But can't you just take a look?" She stands next to me, showing me her notebook. There's a smell like hay and fresh flowers emanating from her. Where the homework should be, only yesterday's date is written.

"You didn't even start!" I exclaim.

Apparently she thinks that's a funny observation, for she titters. "Oh, you're right! Gosh, what am I going to do? Math is right after next period!"

Does she really expect me to do her homework? During my next period, art class? I look at her questioningly, but she just puts on an innocent yet teasing smile.

"Do you know where Amely is?" I ask.

Dark clouds pull over the blue sky in her eyes.

"Amely? Who's Amely?" Her tone suggests I asked something indecent.

"She's in a parallel class. She's got dark, curly hair. She hasn't been to school the last two weeks, but she should have been back by now."

For some reason, Anne's friends find this hilarious. Not so Anne. "I don't know her," she says. She closes her notebook and walks away, her giggling friends in tow. After a few steps, she snaps at them, silencing their laughter.

Shortly thereafter, Kaden approaches.

"Hi, Marco. What did Anne want from you?" He tries to appear indifferent, failing miserably.

"She wanted me to do her math homework. I don't know why she asked me, of all people."

He looks at her, his eyes full of longing. "Isn't that obvious? Since yesterday, you're the school hero!" His voice is a little sad.

"I'm what?"

"Well, you beat up Tiny, didn't you? Nobody likes him. Even Hulk doesn't want to have anything to do with him anymore. I almost feel sorry for him." He grins.

"Yesterday you said it was a bad thing."

"Sure, at first I was upset. Beating those guys up didn't seem like you at all. But in hindsight ... he got what he asked for. And now we're all proud of you!"

I'd rather go without that kind of honor. "Maybe you should ask Anne whether you can help her with her math homework."

It was meant sarcastically, but Kaden brightens. "Do you think so? Yes, maybe you're right!" Before I can stop him, he marches off across the schoolyard.

As I watch him, I suddenly get goose bumps. There's a man in a dark suit standing at the fence that's surrounding the schoolyard, looking at me. He wears a hat, which casts a deep shadow across his face. Two purple lights seem to glow where his eyes should be. But before I'm really sure, he turns around and disappears behind a wall. I feel like someone hit me in the stomach.

A bell rings, signaling the end of recess and releasing me from my paralysis. Mrs. Miller, our art teacher, demonstrates with a small artist's mannequin how the body can express emotion through gesture. She hands out drawing pads and paint sets, asking us to paint a sad man without detailing his face.

"He doesn't look very sad to me," she says, a little later. "More like ... evil."

I startle. The other students are already cleaning their brushes, putting paint boxes and pads back onto the shelf. I didn't even realize that art class is over.

The figure staring at me from my drawing pad has a black, rectangular, very slim body with unnaturally long arms and legs. Its eyes are two purple slits. Around them, I painted concentric circles of the same color, like hypnotizing rays.

"Wow, an enderman!" Kaden exclaims. "Boy, he looks scary!"

Mrs. Miller gazes at me with a puzzled look. "What does that mean?"

I am unable to answer. Cold sweat breaks from my pores. The picture scares me. I want to tear it up, but I'm paralyzed.

"That's a mob from Minecraft, a computer game we like to play," Kaden explains.

"Are you all right?" the teacher asks me.

I gulp down the lump in my throat. "Yes," I manage.

"You don't look good," she states. "Maybe you should stay home for a few more days."

I shake my head. "No, no, I said I'm fine!"

She raises a hand in order to calm me down. "All right, Marco. I know you had a hard time. If the school routine helps you get back to normal, that's good."

Carefully, she pulls the sheet from the pad, holding it up before her. "This is extraordinary. It isn't what I asked you to do, but it is very expressive. Do you mind if I put it on the wall over there?" She points at the place where the best drawings of her students are pinned up. I'm not much of a painter, therefore none of my pictures have ever made it up there before.

I shake my head, although I'd rather tell her to burn the painting. By no means do I want it to stare at me the next time I enter this room.

Mrs. Miller watches me. She puts the picture away. As I'm turning to leave the room together with the other students, she holds me back by my arm.

"Just a moment, Marco. I'd like to discuss something with you."

When we're alone, she asks: "This figure you painted ... it means something, doesn't it?"

I shake my head. I don't want to talk about it. Not about the things Amely's stepfather did to her and to me. Even less about what I went through during my coma.

"It's only a monster from a computer game," I reply. "I just felt like painting it. I'm sorry if that wasn't what you told us to do."

"Marco, if there's anything you want to talk about, I just want to say I'm available, anytime you want. Sometimes art can help us express feelings that we can't put in words. Maybe I can help you find out what this endman means."

"Enderman. It means nothing. Nothing at all! Can I go now? I need to get to math class in time. Mr. Hawker doesn't like us to be late."

She nods. "You know you can come to me anytime," she repeats.

I turn around without a word, trying to hide the fact that my hands and knees are trembling.

3.

Something's wrong, but I don't know what.

Amely hasn't come to school and doesn't answer my texts. I beat up three kids who are much stronger than I am, because I thought they were zombies. In recess, I thought I saw a dark man with purple eyes at the schoolyard fence. In art class, I painted an enderman without realizing what I did. What's wrong with me?

"What's wrong with you?" Mom asks when I come home. "You look at if something is burdening you. Did you get in trouble again because of the brawl yesterday?"

"No," I answer, which is true. I am not able to say anything else - I've never been a good liar.

"Please take your pills. And then tidy up your room."

At least something that's as usual. "Do I have to do it right now?"

"Yes. You're getting a visitor later."

"What visitor?"

"Dr. Johanson, the psychiatrist who talked to you in the hospital. He just wants to speak with you again and make sure you're well."

"I'm fine!"

She looks at me skeptically, then just shrugs.

The shrink! Just what I need right now! He talked to me shortly after I woke up. He asked me whether I had dreamed anything during the coma, but I didn't tell him about my Minecraft adventure. I didn't want him to keep me in the hospital any longer than absolutely necessary. He finally prescribed me the psycho pills I take three times a day since.

Once he realizes what's going on in my head, he'll probably take me with him right away. On the other hand, I may be in need of help. Something seems not quite right with me.

This doesn't solve the problem with Amely, of course. I dial her number for the hundredth time, getting only her voice mail, which is filled to the brim with my messages. The text I send her is short: *R u well? Need answer. Urgent! Marco.*

If only I knew the maiden name of her mother, I could call her grandparents. But I don't know anyone I could ask, apart from Amely's stepfather, who is the last person on earth I ever want to talk to again.

While I ponder what I can do to find out if Amely is all right, the doorbell rings. Mom leads Dr. Johanson to my room. He is tall and very slim, with a thin circle of white hair surrounding a shiny bald spot. His nose is narrow and hooked, giving him the look of a vulture. He stretches out a hand that seems to consist only of wrinkled skin and bone.

"Hello, Marco!" he says with a thin voice. "How are you?"

"Fine," I lie, taking his limp hand. I release it as quickly as possible without being impolite.

Mom leaves us alone. The psychiatrist turns his raptor's head slowly from left to right, as if scanning the surroundings. "Very nice room."

"Yes."

While I sit down on my bed, he takes the desk's chair and begins asking me questions: about my parents, my earliest childhood memories, my favorite toys, what kind of music I hear, whether I like sports. Every time I answer a

question, he says “uh-huh” or “I see,” as if he just got an astounding insight.

After a while, I begin to relax. I have no idea why he’s asking me all these questions, but he doesn’t seem to be interested in what’s going on in my mind right now, and I’m quite happy with that.

No sooner have I felt that than he asks, out of the blue, “What was your first thought when you awoke from the coma?”

“I don’t remember,” I answer truthfully.

“I see. Can you remember anything that happened during your coma?”

“Yes. I already told you. I realized a lot of what was going on around me. I couldn’t move, but I was awake once and again.”

“Uh-huh. You said, Dr. Shelley was in your room two times, correct?”

Dr. Shelley is Amely’s stepfather. The man who maltreated her for years and drugged her mother. The villain who tried to kill me. The enderman. I don’t like it that the psychiatrist calls him by his name, as if he were a normal human being.

“He was there three times. Once with my parents, two times by himself. The last time he gave me a shot.” I show him the spot on my left arm.

“I see. And you are sure that it was Dr. Shelley who gave you the injection, and not, for example, a nurse?”

Dumbfounded, I stare at him. “Of course I am sure! He ... he tried to kill me!”

Dr. Johanson regards me quietly for a moment. “Uh-huh. And why, do you think, did he want to kill you?”

I can't believe it. Didn't he read the police records? "Because I confronted him about Amely. She told me what he did to her and her mother. So he tried to silence me for good."

The psychiatrist nods. "I guess that's a possible explanation."

"A *possible* explanation?" I need all my willpower to keep my anger in check. "What other explanation do you have to offer?"

Instead of answering my question, he asks, "If you were awake the whole day, but couldn't move, it must have been quite boring. What did you think about during all that time?"

I shrug. "I thought about this and that. I mean, things like school, my parents, and of course Amely."

"I see. And you weren't afraid?"

"Of course I was."

"Uh-huh. And what were you afraid of?"

"I was afraid of being trapped forever in a motionless body," I improvise. "I was scared of never being able to break free from that prison."

"I see. But didn't you just say it was boring?"

I need a couple of seconds to answer. "You said that!"

His eyes penetrate me like those of a police officer trying to force a confession from a criminal. "Uh-huh. But you didn't object. When I asked you what you were thinking about, you mentioned school, your parents, and your girlfriend. You never said anything about being scared. Only after I explicitly asked about your fear did you mention it."

"So I was afraid sometimes, and then sometimes I wasn't," I reply lamely.

He nods. "Uh-huh, I see. But, honestly, I don't believe you. Honestly, Marco, I don't think you're telling me the truth."

Speechless, I try to blink back the tears welling up in my eyes.

"You weren't really awake during your coma, were you?"

I avoid his bird-of-prey-like stare. "Not all the time, as I already told you."

"Uh-huh. And did you dream anything during your coma?"

"I ... don't know."

"I see. You're sure about that?"

Again, I have to avoid his eyes. "I can't remember."

"Uh-huh. I see. So it could have been a dream that Dr. Shelley was in your room, giving you an injection, right?"

My lower lip trembles. "What do you want from me?"

A thin smile appears below his hooked nose. "The truth, Marco. Nothing but the truth. After all, someone is about to be convicted for trying to murder you, on the grounds of your testimony. Someone who might well be innocent."

I jump to my feet. "Innocent?" I shout. "That jerk mistreated his stepdaughter, drugged me, and tried to kill me. And you claim he's innocent?"

The psychiatrist spreads his arms. "No need to get worked up, Marco. I don't claim anything. I just want to find out the truth."

"What I told you is the truth, you ... you cheater!"

For a moment, his face darkens. Is there a purple shine in his eyes? No, I'm just imagining it. Before he can reply anything, Mom steps into the room.

"Excuse me, I just wanted to ask whether you'd like a coffee or ... Marco! What's wrong?"

"He doesn't believe me!" I say, my voice trembling. "He claims I'm lying. He thinks Amely's stepfather is innocent and I just imagined everything!"

Mom's eyes widen, then narrow to slits. That only happens when she gets really mad. "Is that true?" she asks Dr. Johanson.

"Can I talk to you for a moment, alone?" the psychiatrist asks quietly.

Puzzled, Mom looks back and forth between us. "Yes, okay."

"Good-bye, Marco," Dr. Johanson says, extending his hand.

I don't take it.

When Mom comes back into my room half an hour later, I am still sitting on my bed in a daze.

She sits down beside me and puts an arm around my shoulder. "How do you feel?"

I can hardly hold back the tears. "They're going to release that snake from prison, aren't they? He's going to take revenge on Amely. Maybe on me as well."

Mam sighs. "I don't know. Dr. Johanson says that during a coma, sometimes reality and dreams blend. That you may not really know which is which."

"And you believe him?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know what to believe."

Upset, I jump to my feet. "Don't you realize what's going on? Can't you see that Amely's stepfather has sent this Dr. Johanson to us in order to discredit my testimony?"

She looks at me, and to my horror her eyes are filled with tears as well. "How can you think that, Marco! Dr. Johanson looks after all the patients in the hospital who got brain injuries."

"So that's what you think? That my brain is injured?"

After a moment of silence, she says very softly, "Your art teacher called me earlier. She said you appeared to be distraught. And that you painted a very strange picture. Marco, what is happening? Please talk to me about it!"

I clench my fists. "Leave me alone!" I shout. "Just leave me alone!"

Nodding, she walks out of my room.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I say as we sit down for dinner at the small kitchen table. "I didn't mean to shout at you. It's just ... this Dr. Johanson made me quite upset."

Putting her hand on mine, she smiles. "It's okay."

After we eat in silence for a while, I say, "I'm worried."

"Worried? About what?"

"About Amely. Since Sunday afternoon, I haven't heard anything from her."

"Didn't she and her mother visit her grandparents?"

"Yes, but she was supposed to be back on Sunday, and she said she'd be in school on Monday. But she wasn't."

"She probably stayed with her grandparents longer than expected. Maybe they went off on a trip where there is no cell phone reception. I'm sure she'll get back to you shortly."

"Maybe ... could you ask the police whether they heard anything? You have the number of that detective who spoke to me in the hospital, don't you? Could you at least ask him whether Amely's stepfather is still in jail?"

She regards me silently for a moment. Finally, she nods. "All right. But I'm sure everything's fine, Marco."

Although it's already eight o'clock in the evening, the detective answers the phone. He tells Mom that Amely's stepfather is still in custody. He doesn't know where Amely and her mother are, but has no reason to believe anything is amiss, so there's nothing he can do.

I'm not reassured. I can feel there's something wrong. If only I could do something about it!

At a loss, I go to bed. I'm tired, but it takes me a long time to fall asleep.

In the middle of the night, I wake with a start. There's a soft hissing sound, which probably woke me up. Puzzled, I fumble for the switch of my bedside lamp. As I turn it on, I shout out in fear.

There's a green, rectangular shape with a cubic head and four stumps as feet standing right beside my bed. Its mouth looks like a dark crescent, the edges drawn down. Although this can't be happening, the creeper looks absolutely real.

The hissing grows louder. It's about to explode!

All I can think to do is to hide under my blanket.

Tense, I lie there, waiting for the explosion, which never comes. When I finally pull the blanket back, the monster is gone. I get up to search my room, but find nothing out of place.

Mom opens the door to my room. "Marco! What happened? I heard you shout. Is everything all right?"

"Just a nightmare, Mom."

"Then why aren't you lying in bed?"

"I'm thirsty." To support my excuse, I fetch a glass of water from the kitchen.

Mom watches me with a concerned expression. "Good night, Marco!"

"Good night, Mom!"

But it's not a good night, not for me anyway. I lie there, staring into the darkness, until the alarm clock releases me from my gloomy musings.

At breakfast, Mom observes, "You don't look well."

"I didn't sleep well."

"You shouldn't be going to school today."

This time, I don't object. I'm so tired that I can hardly keep my eyes open. And Amely won't be there anyway. I texted her two messages last night, but again got no reply.

Mom calls the school to tell them I'm sick. When she has the school office on the line, she asks whether Amely's mom has excused her daughter too. But the secretary just tells her she's not allowed to give out any information on other pupils.

"Thanks, Mom."

She smiles. "You're welcome."

After I finish my breakfast and take my medicine, I go to my room to check my messages. Nothing from Amely. Without much hope, I dial her number. I'm all the more surprised when suddenly, after three ringtones, the call is answered.

"Amely? It's Marco. Finally I get you on the line! How are you?"

Instead of an answer, there's just a soft hiss at the other end.

"Amely? Please answer me! Are you okay?"

The hissing grows louder. Then, suddenly, the connection is cut off. I dial Amely's number again, but this time I only get her voice mail. After leaving her a message, I tell Mom about it.

"Something's wrong. We need to call the police!"

"There was just a hiss? Then she probably had connection problems. Didn't you say her grandparents live in the mountains? There is often bad cell reception up there."

"But it wasn't like that," I object. "It didn't sound like a bad connection. There was just this strange hiss. Almost as

if ...” I start as I suddenly realize what the sound reminded me of.

“Almost as if what?”

“Never mind. I guess you’re right. Just bad cell reception.”

Mom raises an eyebrow. She’s not used to me giving in so quickly. But I can hardly tell her that it sounded as if a creeper answered Amely’s cell phone, can I?

Bewildered, I go back to my room. Am I just imagining everything? But I clearly heard a hiss! I ...

I glance at the wall behind my desk. There’s the green Minecraft poster with the words “Creepers gonna creep!” But where the monster should be, there’s just an empty spot, as if it has sneaked away.

I get goose bumps. This can’t be! Slowly I approach the poster to touch the smooth print. There can be no doubt: The creeper is gone.

As if in a trance, I go back to the kitchen. “Mom, can you please come with me?”

She looks startled. “What now?”

“Just come!”

She follows me to my room. “What do you want to show me?”

With a trembling hand I point at the poster. The creeper on it looks sadly at me.

“The poster ...”

“You mean that cucumber thing? What’s wrong with it?”

I gulp down the lump on my throat. “Just a moment ago, it ... it wasn’t there. I mean, the poster was here, but the creeper was gone.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean, ‘gone’?”

Tears well up in my eyes. "I think something's wrong with me."

We sit down on my bed and I tell her everything: How I found myself in the Minecraft world, without any memory of who I was and how I got there. How I wandered around the Cubeworld that appeared so real to me. How I fled from zombies and creepers, until, with Simon's help, I found the room of riddles and finally understood what was happening to me. How I awoke a few times in the hospital, unable to move, but fell back into the Cubeworld every time.

Mom listens in silence, one arm around me. Only once in a while does she ask about some detail she didn't understand: "What's a ghaſt?" or "Do zombie pigmen really look like undead pigs?"

As I describe how, with the help of the Enderdragon, I finally managed to trigger a jerk of my arm, pulling out a cable from the cardiac monitor and causing an alarm that called a doctor to attention, she takes me in her arms and squeezes me firmly. "My poor boy! My poor, poor boy! How brave you were!"

She releases me, her eyes red from crying. "But that wasn't all you wanted to tell me, was it?"

I shake my head and describe how Tiny and his followers turned into zombies, how I saw an enderman at the school fence, how a creeper stood beside my bed last night, and what the hissing sound on Amely's phone meant.

"And then, the creeper on the poster was suddenly gone," I finish.

Mom stares at the poster behind my desk for a long time, as if she expected the creeper to sneak away a second time. But of course nothing happens.

"So Dr. Johanson was right," she says softly, more to herself.

"Do you think ... I'm crazy?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "No. You're just experiencing hallucinations. The coma has affected your brain. Dr. Johanson told me that something like this could happen. He said it's relatively easy to treat, especially at your age. I'll call him right away!"

I want to stop her, but I say nothing. This Dr. Johanson gives me the creeps, but he saw through me right away, so he probably knows what he's doing. Whether I like him or not - if he can help me get rid of these hallucinations, I'm ready to do everything he says.

In the afternoon, Mom drives me to Dr. Johanson's office, which is located in a large house on a park-like property. Beside the entrance is an engraved plate that reads "*Edgar Johanson Clinic for Neuropsychiatry.*" A shiver runs down my spine as we walk into the entrance hall, but I won't duck out now.

A pretty receptionist leads us to a waiting room. A few minutes later, Dr. Johanson calls us into his office. He smiles at me, but his eyes are still like those of a bird of prey.

"It's good that you decided to come, Marco." He extends his limp hand.

"I'm going to wait outside," Mom says. I almost beg her to stay with me, but that would be silly - after all, I'm not a small child anymore.

The psychiatrist points to a couch. "Why don't you make yourself comfortable over there. And then just tell me what happened."

I sit down. "Okay. But I want to make something clear right away: Even if I experienced some very strange hallucinations, that doesn't mean I imagined everything. Amely's stepfather gave me an injection against my will when I accused him in his office. That's the reason why I fell into a coma. And I know he's been to the hospital more than once, trying to kill me."

Dr. Johanson nods. "Uh-huh. Yes, yes, of course. I see. Now, just lie down and do exactly as I tell you. I'm going to put you into a relaxed state, so you can tell me everything without fear."

His voice becomes calm and deep. "Close your eyes. Now take a deep breath, hold it for a moment, release it. Good. Again: Breathe in deeply, hold your breath, exhale. Very good. Now you can feel your arms getting heavier and heavier ..."

I open my eyes and sit up. "Just a minute! Are you going to hypnotize me?"

He smiles reassuringly. "Don't be afraid. The word 'hypnosis' stems from the Greek word for sleep. It's just a state of deep relaxation, lowering the barriers to your subconscious. In this way, we can find out what really happened. And despite whatever you've seen on TV, it's completely impossible to force someone to do something against his will with hypnosis."

"And if I tell you under hypnosis what happened, will you believe me then?"

"Uh ... but of course, Marco! That's exactly why we're doing this. Trust me. I just want to help you."

I'm not really convinced, but as I close my eyes and Dr. Johanson talks to me in a calm voice, I begin to relax. When the psychiatrist tells me that my whole body gets heavy and

warm, this really seems to happen. It's a comfortable feeling. And suddenly, I'm back at the beach in the Cubeworld.

So I begin to recount my adventures: "Something's wrong, but I don't know what. I don't even know how I know that there's something wrong. It's just a strange feeling that the world isn't quite like it should be. The world is a beach, with some terrace-like hills behind it. Waves wash silently against the sand. A cool breeze comes in from the sea. The air smells of salt ..."

It is not my bed I'm lying in when I wake up. The room is small, with colorful paintings of landscapes on the yellow walls. There's a small bathroom in one corner. I'm in my underwear. My jeans, shirt, and sweater hang on a chair next to a small desk with a pad and pencil on it. The curtains, printed with floral designs, are drawn.

Confused, I sit up. Where am I? As I move the curtains apart, outside I see a small park. A young man in the white clothes of a nurse and an old woman wearing a bathrobe are walking around.

I look at my watch: half past nine. I start as I realize that I've spent the night in the mental hospital. I try to suppress the anxiety swelling up in me. Maybe Dr. Johanson has just brought me here because I fell asleep during his hypnosis. For sure, Mom will come to pick me up shortly. She'll never let me stay in the nuthouse. She won't!

I dress quickly. I half expect the door to be locked, but it isn't. A narrow corridor with a shiny gray floor leads to a door, behind which I can hear voices. It opens into a large room. At a few tables people are having breakfast. An old man sits on a sofa before a wall-mounted TV, watching cartoons.

A stocky woman with short gray hair gets up from her chair and approaches me. She wears a white suit and a name tag.

"You must be Marco!" Smiling, she stretches out her hand. "I'm Sister Carol."

"Where's my mom?" I ask, ignoring her hand.

"Why don't you sit down with us and have breakfast first?"

"I'm not hungry. I want to go home."

Sister Carol regards me with sympathy. "Of course you want that. And for sure, you'll be able to go home very soon. But first you need to eat something, so you can keep up your strength. As we say here, a healthy mind requires a healthy body."

"'Soon'? What do you mean by 'soon'? I want to talk to my mother, right now!"

The other patients stop eating and stare at us. Sister Carol's face darkens. Her eyes suddenly appear cold and heartless. "We don't talk to the nursing staff like that," she says quietly, but with an unmistakable threat in her voice.

Only now do I think of checking the pockets of my jeans. I'm not sure whether I had my cell phone on me yesterday, but if so, it has been taken away. "Can I please make a brief phone call?"

To my surprise, Sister Carol nods. "But of course. Follow me." She leads me to an old-fashioned phone mounted to the wall.

As I dial Mom's number, instead of a tone, I hear soft music from the receiver.

"What's this supposed to be?" I shout. "It's not a real phone!"

"I already said, we don't talk like that to the nursing staff," Sister Carol replies. The last traces of friendliness and sympathy have left her face. "If you don't adhere to our rules, I can't help but put you into the Soothing Room."

Groans come from the other patients at those words. A frail-looking woman with short, black hair bursts into tears.

I finally realize I'm trapped. Dr. Johanson must have talked Mom into keeping me here. He probably told her I'm crazy. Maybe this has been arranged by Amely's stepfather,

in order to silence me as an inconvenient witness. Declaring me insane is even more effective than killing me.

I turn to Sister Carol. "Please, I just want to see my mother only once. Is that possible?"

A smile appears on her face. "Of course that's possible, dear. I'll personally see to it. But you have to be nice until then, all right?"

Swallowing my anger and fear, I answer, "Yes, Sister Carol."

"That's much better. And now have something for breakfast. You'll feel much better afterward."

Not one of the other patients is even close to my age, so I just sit down on the closest empty chair. At the round table with me are an older man with a large nose and a bald spot on his head, a pretty young woman, and a stocky man with thick-rimmed glasses.

"You're a new arrival, right?" the woman asks. She has short, blond hair and light blue eyes.

"Yes. I'm Marco."

"Elfie." She gives me her slender hand, introducing the other two. "This is Sir William, member of Her Majesty's Secret Service."

"Psst!" The stocky man seems upset. Doing his best to speak with a British accent, he says, "How often do I have to tell you I'm here on an undercover mission?"

"And over there is ..." begins Elfie, pointing at the older man.

"God," he interrupts. "You may call me Karl, for simplicity's sake. Nice to meet you, Marco."

"Um, yes, nice to meet you too." I turn to Elfie. "And what do you think you are? A character from *The Lord of the Rings*?"

She looks at me aghast. "What ... what do you mean?"

"Sorry. I ... I just thought ... I mean, why are you here?"

She smiles. "It's all right. You couldn't have known."

"Known what?"

"That I'm a spirit."

"A ... spirit. You mean, you're dead?"

She rolls her eyes. "If I was dead, I wouldn't sit here having breakfast, would I?"

"Um, no, but ... I always thought, spirits ..."

"That's a common misconception," she explains seriously. "Spirits are not dead. Spirits are invisible."

"Who are you talking to, Marco?" Sir William asks, winking at me over the rim of his glasses.

"But I can see you!" I object.

"That's just because I want you to see me."

I'm at a loss. I've gotten myself into a genuine loony bin, sitting at a table with a spirit, a British spy, and none other than the Almighty himself! At least they seem to be friendly.

Despite all that, I'm suddenly hungry. So I grab a roll from a basket. As I reach for the pitcher of milk, the stocky guy holds back my arm. "I wouldn't drink that, if I were you. They put some stuff in there to make us docile. In the jam as well."

Startled, I stare at my plate, then at the self-declared spy. Just as I'm about to ignore his warning, I remember Sister Carol saying, *Now have something for breakfast. You'll feel much better afterward.*

The older man named Karl reaches out and makes a strange gesture above my plate, murmuring something. "Now it's harmless," he says. "I just turned the diazepam into sugar molecules."

"Thanks, but I guess I'm not hungry anymore," I reply.

Sir William nods, making a circling motion with his index finger at the side of his head to indicate what he thinks about Karl's claim.

A feeling of desperation overcomes me. If Amely's stepfather is behind this, I'll have a hard time getting out of here!

Suddenly, a new thought enters my mind: What if Amely has been put into a mental hospital as well? Maybe even into the same one?

"Did you ...?" I start asking, but Karl interrupts me.

"She isn't here."

I stare at him. "What?"

"She's not here," he repeats.

"Who's not here?" Elfie asks.

"Her Majesty," Sir William answers. "She's at Buckingham Palace, safe. I made sure of that."

"What did you mean, 'she's not here'?" I ask again.

"The girl you're looking for," Karl replies. "She's not here."

"How ... do you know?"

"I'm God, remember?"

For a second, I'm at a loss for words. Then I realize that he is just playing a cheap trick on me, like a fortune-teller or a professional magician. I'm a fourteen-year-old boy, so it's not unlikely that I'm interested in a girl. "God" just made a good guess.

He shakes his head slowly, as if he knew what I'm thinking. But this is just another ruse.

The feeling of helplessness is overwhelming. Using a paper napkin, I wipe a tear from the corner of my eye.

Karl smiles, as if to soothe me. "Don't worry, I can help you to get out of here."

"Leave me alone!" I reply. "Just leave me alone, all of you!"

Sister Carol comes to our table. "Everything all right?" she asks with a false smile.

Everyone nods. I take a bite of my bread, hoping that Sir William was just making up his food warning.

"The boy doesn't belong here," Karl suddenly says.

"That's not your decision," Sister Carol replies calmly.

"Yes, it is. But I'm going to change it soon."

"All right, you do that." She turns to me. "He thinks he's God. Don't take him seriously."

I just nod.

"And you, Sister Carol, will go straight to hell!" Karl says.

She turns around. "What did you say?"

Karl grins broadly. "You're going to hell, where you belong. You'll get the full lineup: sulfur baths, demons poking your behind with tridents ..."

"I told you a hundred times, we don't talk like that to the nursing staff!"

"I'm not afraid of you!" He makes a gesture encompassing the whole room. "I conceived everything in here. If I wanted, I could turn you into a turkey anytime!"

"Enough! One more word, and you'll find yourself in the Soothing Room!"

Still grinning, Karl remains quiet. Apparently, even the Almighty has some respect for this nurse.

"Sister Carol, may I please speak to Dr. Johanson?" I ask politely.

"The doctor has an appointment right now," she says. "But he'll have time for you later, I'm sure."

Sir William bends toward me. "That's what she says every time. But the doctor never sees us."

"I heard that, Willy!" Sister Carol says.

"Rats!" he murmurs. "Secrecy has been breached! I need to call headquarters immediately!" He holds his greasy breakfast knife next to his ear. "London? Can you hear me? London?"

Sister Carol sighs. "Put down the cell phone, Willy! You know there's no reception in here!"

Sir William stares at the knife, nods, and puts it back beside his plate.

"There are some books and games over there, Marco." Sister Carol points to a shelf at the wall. "You can take whatever you want. But be careful and put everything back when you don't need it anymore." She smiles at me. "And don't worry, I know you're not as crazy as the others here. I'm sure you'll get home very soon."

"Who's crazy?" Sir William asks. But the nurse ignores him and leaves us alone.

"How about a game of Snakes & Ladders?" Karl suggests.

"Oh yes!" Elfie agrees.

"Not me," Sir William says. "You're going to win anyway."

"Come on!" Karl says. "This time, I'm letting the die roll completely randomly."

"That's what you said last time. Then you landed on all the ladders *completely randomly*, while I got eaten by the same snake over and over again!"

"Can I help it if I'm just lucky?"

"Stop arguing!" Elfie interjects. "What about you, Marco? Are you playing with us?"

I shake my head. "No thanks. I don't feel like it."

Karl winks at me. "Maybe you're going to find something interesting over there."

Since I've got nothing better to do, I follow his suggestion and walk over to the shelf. There are many books, some of which I recognize: Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, for example, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende, and *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman.

Among a few stacks of board games, a cube-shaped box draws my attention: a Minecraft Lego set. As I take the box, I wonder whether it's here by chance, or if Dr. Johanson put it there on purpose, just for me.

The Lego pieces are still in their plastic bag, so the psychiatrist must have bought the set for me. I'm about to put it back onto the shelf, when I recognize a small green figure in the bag. The creeper turns its tiny cubic head toward me and looks at me with his sad face.

Is this starting all over again? I close my eyes. When I open them again, the monster still seems to look at me reproachfully.

No, this didn't happen. I just imagined it! I tear open the bag and pick the figure out of the jumble of colorful plastic bricks. It consists of three separate pieces - a plate for the feet, a small green brick for the body, and another with a tiny creeper face printed on it. The head can be moved easily. Maybe it just turned by itself when I moved the contents of the box earlier.

Do I hear a soft hiss? Without thinking, I hold the creeper next to my ear. Indeed, it is hissing like a leaking soda bottle. Startled, I drop the creeper. As it hits the floor, it explodes with a clearly audible plop. The three plastic parts fly in different directions.

"You've got to be careful with the toys. Sister Carol scolds us if we damage something." That was Elfie. Together with Karl and Sir William, she stands next to me, watching me with a critical eye.

"Didn't you agree to play Snakes & Ladders?" I ask.

"We're already finished," Sir William says. "Of course, Karl won. He just walked up all the ladders, finishing the game in just seven moves. Can you believe that? I didn't even get past square number seventeen!"

"So I'm a lucky duck," Karl says, grinning.

I collect the three pieces of the creeper, put them together, and hold the figure next to my ear. No hiss.

Elfie giggles. "Do you think it's going to talk to you?"

"Leave him alone," Karl says. "He's confused, because he doesn't know where he is."

"He doesn't know where he is?" Elfie asks. "But he's here!"

"Is he?"

"I don't understand."

Karl sighs. "Aren't we gods used to that!"

I've had enough. Quickly, I gather the Lego bricks and put the box back onto the shelf. I look for the nurse, but she is nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Sister Carol?"

"In a secret place, where we can't go," Sir William whispers. He looks around as if he's afraid of being watched. "What nobody is supposed to know: She's really a robot! She is now in some kind of workshop, where she is being recharged!"

"Don't scare the poor boy with your nonsense!" Elfie scolds.

I ignore their banter. The room has two exits. One leads to the corridor I came from. I open the other, entering a short passageway. To the right, I can hear the clatter of dishes, indicating the kitchen. The door at the end of the passage is locked. A card reader is mounted next to the doorknob. To the left, there's a small office behind a glass door. A young man with a beard, dressed in a white lab coat, sits at the desk, staring at the computer monitor.

I knock and enter the room without waiting for an invitation. "Excuse me, I'd like to talk to Dr. Johanson."

A sign on the coat identifies the man as Nurse Ralph. He nods, clicks with his mouse, and stares at the monitor. "The doctor has an appointment right now," he says.

"I know. When does he have time for me?"

"I can't say, I'm afraid."

"You can see his schedule, can't you?" I bend over the desk to take a peek at the monitor. Instead of a schedule, it shows a card game.

"Patients are not allowed to use the computer!" Nurse Ralph exclaims.

"It is my right to talk to the doctor!"

"The doctor will see to you, as soon as he's ready."

"I want to talk to him right now!"

The nurse's face darkens. "Listen, boy. Obviously, you're new here, so let me explain something to you: We don't talk like that to the nursing staff! If you want something, you may ask for it politely. We nurses then decide if and when you can have it, and our decision is irrevocable. If we refuse something, it is always for a good reason and only with your best interests in mind."

I point at the telephone on his desk. "May I *please* make a phone call?"

"The patient's telephone is in the recreation room."

"I'd rather use a real telephone, one of those where someone answers the call at the other end, so I can then speak to my mom."

Nurse Ralph looks at me as if he thinks I'm crazy, although he's obviously the one who doesn't get it, because he just repeats, "The patient's telephone is in the recreation room."

"It's only playing music," I object.

"Maybe you dialed the wrong number."

"It plays music as soon as you lift the receiver. Dialing changes nothing at all."

The nurse sighs. "All right, I'll call a technician to repair the phone. Now, if you please leave me alone, I've got work to do."

I feel like a creeper ready to explode. Obviously, any jail offers more rights to its inmates than this nuthouse! But I know that complaining, begging, or threatening will get me nowhere. I'll have to wait until Dr. Johanson deigns to bestow his attention on me. And if he doesn't, I need to get away from here somehow, although I have not the slightest idea how to accomplish that.

Back in my room, I realize the window can't be opened. The other doors lead to more patient's rooms. In one of them, a woman with long, white hair sits on her bed cross-legged, hands on her knees, palms faced upward, her eyes closed.

"Excuse me," I murmur.

As I am about to close the door again, she opens her eyes and looks directly at me.

"Come in," she says in a hoarse but calm voice. "I've been expecting you."

"You're expecting me?" I ask, nonplussed, before I remember I'm in a nuthouse. The old woman probably thinks she's some kind of prophet.

"Yes. I'm the prophet Ismalda. I can show you the way."

"Can you show me the way out?"

She nods. "Yes, of course. But it isn't easy. Sit down." She nods at the chair beside her desk, which looks exactly like the one in my room.

As I'm feeling a little guilty for disturbing her, I comply.

"It's not walls and doors that stop you," the self-proclaimed prophet says.

"What's that supposed to mean? Do you suggest I can walk right through walls?"

"You could, if you really wanted."

I touch the wall behind the desk. "This feels quite massive."

"Yes, it does feel so."

I don't know what to answer, while Ismalda regards me quietly, as if waiting for something.

"Didn't you just want to tell me how I can get out of here?" I ask.

"No, I didn't," she answers, shaking her head. "You wanted me to tell you. But it doesn't work like that. There's always an easy and a difficult path. The difficult one is simple, while the easy one is hard."

"I see. And what does that mean?"

"It means you've got to see the right way on your own."

I realize I'm wasting my time here. Still, I feel like I should try it one last time. "So, how do I get out of here?"

"Walk through the door," Ismalda answers, smiling.

"I guess that's exactly what I'm going to do," I say as I get up and open the door.

"Good luck, Marco!" she calls after me.

Only when I'm back in the corridor do I realize that I didn't tell her my name. I open the door again. "How do you know who I am?"

"I believe I already mentioned I'm a prophet."

Sure, what else? Most likely she simply overheard me introducing myself during breakfast. But still, following an impulse, I ask, "Do you know where Amely is?"

She nods. "She's waiting for you."

"Where?"

"At the end of the stairs."

"What stairs?"

"You'll find them."

With a sigh, I say, "Thank you for the big help!"

"You're welcome."

At the end of the corridor, there's a door with a sign reading "No Exit." As if! I turn the knob, assuming that it will be locked, but the door opens, revealing a small cabinet full of cleaning agents, brooms, buckets, towels, bedclothes, and so on.

While I'm still musing over the fact that someone has put a no-exit sign on the door to a broom closet, I inspect the other rooms, which all look similar to mine and are empty.

I go back to the recreation room. Elfie and Sir William are engaged in a heated discussion about how well spirits are suited for the British secret service. While Elfie argues that their natural ability to turn invisible qualifies them as excellent spies, Sir William claims spirits are talkative by nature and therefore unfit for missions of secrecy. Karl watches them with crossed arms, smiling. As he sees me, he waves.

"Hi, Marco! In the mood for a game of Snakes & Ladders?"

Just as I'm about to reject the offer, I get an idea. "Yes, why not?"

While Elfie agrees happily, Sir William murmurs a disgruntled "Not again," but still puts his piece on the board.

Karl begins. He throws a four, landing him on the foot of a ladder leading to square fourteen.

"If you're landing on the foot of a ladder just once more, I quit playing," Sir William says.

Karl raises his hands in a gesture of defeat. "I told you, I'm not cheating! And I can't always be lucky, can I?"

Elfie throws next, also a four. Sir William throws a two. He grumbles, looking at Karl as if this were his fault.

I throw a four, joining Elfie and Karl on square fourteen. As the game continues, Sir William misses every ladder and gets eaten by the first snake he encounters, while with only four moves I land at the foot of the longest ladder in the game, bringing me right up to square eighty-four. From there, I take only three rolls - two sixes and one four - to make it to the finish. Elfie and Karl come in second and third, while Sir William still can't make it past the snake head on square seventeen.

"You seem to love that serpent very much, as often as you kiss it," Karl observes.

"This is outrageous!" Sir William cries out, beating his fist on the table so hard that the playing pieces do little jumps. "I swear I'll never play this stupid game again in my whole life!"

"What's going on here? Are you misbehaving again, Willy?"

The poor secret agent winces. "No, of course not, Sister Carol! It's just - he's cheating again!"

While I wonder how the nurse has managed to creep up completely unnoticed, she watches me with penetrating eyes. "Is that true, Marco?"

I raise my hands in defense. "No!"

"Not him," Sir William says. "That one!" He gestures at Karl.

Sister Carol points her index finger at the older man. "If you're going to stir up all the patients again, Karl, I'm going to ..."

"You're going to do what?" Karl interrupts her.

"You shouldn't think you're something special, just because you wrote a few books!" Sister Carol grunts. "I'll drive out your delusions of grandeur soon enough! You're going to stay in the Soothing Room until you can't even write your own name anymore!"

Karl doesn't seem impressed in the least. "Just remember, Sister Carol: I can turn you into a turkey anytime! Or worse!"

"Oh yeah? Let's see you doing that! Turn me into a turkey right here and now! Or aren't you almighty, after all?"

"Patience, Sister Carol! Just a little patience!"

"You ... impertinent ..." Without finishing her sentence, the nurse turns around and walks off stiffly. My respect regarding Karl is growing.

"You wrote books? Like a real writer?" I ask.

He nods. "Yes, a few."

"What kind?"

He waves dismissingly. "Whodunits, thrillers, that kind of stuff."

"And ... how did you get in here?"

A broad grin brightens his face. "My last book made readers doubt the reality they live in. And that, some people think, is dangerous. Because if you don't take the things going on around you so seriously anymore, you're much harder to intimidate and control. So they brought me here to silence me for good. That's what they think, anyway."

"And in reality?"

He grins once again. "Reality? What's that supposed to mean? As I said before, I just imagined all of it: this room and everything in it, Elfie, Sir William, Sister Carol, even you and me."

"You think we're in one of your books?" I ask, confused.

"We're existing in the fantasy of its readers, to be specific."

"That's why you think you're God? Because you can change the story anytime?"

Karl frowns. "Not really, I'm afraid. The story is already finished. I can't change it anymore. Whatever will happen, has already happened. As I wrote it down, it became reality, so to speak. It's probably a bit hard to understand."

"So you know what's going to happen?"

"Um, yes."

"And can you tell me?"

"No. That would spoil the story for the reader, wouldn't it?"

Sure. A clever excuse, I must give him that.

"Would you like to play another game?" Elfie asks.

I shake my head, looking out of the window. "Would you care to take a walk outside?"

Startled, Elfie looks at me. "Take a walk? What do you mean?"

"I just thought we could get a little fresh air ..."

"That's not possible!" She sounds frightened at the thought.

"It's not allowed," Sir William clarifies. "Only under supervision by a nurse. Too many secrets out there, if you understand what I mean."

"I see. If that's the case, I'm going to go to my room and read." I take one of the books from the shelf: *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende. My mother read it to me when I was eight or nine years old. Of course I'm not really in the mood to read it now - I just want to be alone for a while, and a book seems the best excuse.

As I let my hand wander over the gray cover, I remember a scene described in the book that resembles my recent discussion with Karl: The Childlike Empress meets the Old Man of Wandering Mountain, who writes down everything that happens in Fantastica, making it real in the process. Maybe Karl read the book, too.

I take it with me to my room, lie down on my bed, and stare at the ceiling, trying to come up with a way out of my situation. I need to get out of here, or at least contact my mother. But the latter seems impossible because they took away every means of communication, just leaving me that ridiculous toy telephone. The only way to reach the outside world seems to be in the office. But that is most likely either staffed or locked all the time.

My thoughts go round and round in circles, until I finally fall asleep.

When I awake, it's already dark outside. Only a square moon casts its pale light on the park.

Wait a minute! A *square* moon? No, I was mistaken. As I look at it again, the moon is as round as it is supposed to be.

It's half past eleven. Quietly, I open the door. The corridor is dark and empty. I can hear loud snoring from one of the other rooms. I sneak into the recreation room. Although nobody is here, the TV is still running. The passage at the other end is empty as well, the office behind the glass door unlit.

I can feel my heart in my mouth as I turn the knob of the glass door. Locked. What else did I expect? For a while, I just stand there, unsure what to do. If I broke the door, the noise would raise all nurses at once. I could try to pick the lock, but I have no idea how to do that. It looks easy when heroes do it in movies, using nothing more than a plastic card. But I don't have one, and I doubt it would be of any use.

"Can I help you?" I hear a soft voice behind me.

I almost faint with shock. As I turn around, I expect to see a nurse in a white coat, but it's the stocky figure of Sir William, grinning at me in the pale light of an emergency lamp.

I sigh in relief. "You gave me quite a start!"

"Trying to break into the office? You'll be getting into a lot of trouble if they find out!"

"I know. But I have to call my mother!"

"I see. Let me have a look! For us professional agents, such a lock is no hindrance." Before I can object, he kneels

down, fumbling at the lock with a small object, a paper clip maybe. To my amazement, there is a sudden click, and the door opens.

"At your service!" Sir William says, stepping aside. "Please don't tell them that I was here, okay? They mustn't know I'm working for the secret service!"

"Don't worry, my lips are sealed. Thank you!"

While Sir William sneaks back to the recreation room, I rush into the office, grabbing the telephone. I probably won't have much time. There must be a nurse on night shift who probably comes looking around once in a while.

As I pick up the receiver, there's only a children's song to be heard. Oh no! This phone can't be a fake as well! I press the keys like a maniac, but instead of a dial tone, I only hear that stupid music.

The only other way in here to communicate with the outside world is the computer, so I press the Start key. While the machine is booting up, I listen for noises from the corridor, but everything remains quiet.

Finally, there's the Windows Start screen, asking me for a password. Rats! On impulse, I enter "password," but all I achieve is a terribly loud beeping noise and the message "wrong password." The nurses apparently aren't that stupid.

Desperate, I look around. Like most people, my mother can't remember all her passwords, so she uses a small notebook that's hidden in her desk drawer. I search the desk, but find nothing.

An advertising calendar on the wall catches my eye. A slogan is printed on it: "Glanotricycline - effective and fast against stress and anxiety."

Without any better options, I enter “Glanotricycline” in the password box. It works! The Windows desktop comes up, playing a melody so loudly that I’m sure it must have stirred up half the clinic.

My heart beating wildly, I sit there, listening, but still there’s nothing to be heard from the outside. Opening the browser gives me my next disappointment: There’s no Internet connection. Rats! What computer nowadays doesn’t have Internet access? I click through the menus in system preferences, but there’s no WLAN I can connect to, and although there’s a LAN cable leading to a socket in the wall, I can’t connect to anything.

Frustrated, I close the browser. As I am about to shut down the computer, a well-known icon on the desktop catches my eye: a small cube of earth with a green top and the word “Minecraft” below it.

I let the mouse hover above the icon. What if it’s a trap? What if Dr. Johanson installed this icon because he suspected me trying something like this? What if clicking on it causes an alarm somewhere?

Taking a deep breath, I cast my doubts aside and double-click the icon.

Instead of running the normal Minecraft launcher, the program opens right away into the Minecraft world. I’m standing on a beach. To my right, waves wash softly against the shore. To my left, there are a few levels of grass and some rectangular birch trees.

My throat tightens. I know this place. I know it all too well!

8.

Something's wrong. Something is completely wrong about the world!

Or am *I* wrong? Is it just coincidence that I've spawned at a location very similar to the starting point of my odyssey during my coma? In a typical Minecraft world, there's a lot of coast, so it's not unlikely to begin the game on a beach.

Hopping up the staircase-like hills, I soon discover a sheep. Behind the hills, there's a desert, with mountains in the distance. My suspicion turns to certainty when I discover the crater in the sand, left behind by the exploding creeper. Shortly after that I reach the remains of a blown-up hut.

Dumbfounded, I stare at the monitor. This simply can't be! I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and open them again. The Minecraft world still looks exactly like I remember it from the coma. The view dissolves as I wipe tears from my eyes. I want to turn off the computer, but something inside me urges me on.

I follow my own tracks through the Cubeworld. It is a very strange feeling to experience the same thing again, but this time from a player's perspective instead of really being there. As if I were following myself, like a ghost. What if I encounter myself in the game? That would be really creepy!

I reach the hut at the edge of the forest. As expected, there's a deep hole inside. Some fool, without thinking, has dug straight down and finally fallen into a dark cave full of skeletons, zombies, and creepers.

This time, I'm smarter. First, I cut some wood, turn part of it into charcoal, and craft a few dozen torches. Then I dig

down a slanted path until I reach the ceiling of the cave. From there, I create a staircase to the ground.

Everything is like I remember, including skeletons, zombies, and the makeshift bridge I built earlier. Instead of fighting, I simply avoid the monsters, following the small river until I reach a giant cave. At one wall, there's a small stone building with a garden lit by torches: Simon's home. Will I meet him there?

An ugly noise reminds me that I'm not alone down here. A skeleton has hit me with an arrow. Since I'm not wearing any armor, it reduces my life energy by a significant amount.

Quickly, I open the door and flee into the house. But there's an unpleasant surprise waiting for me: Instead of a knight in shining diamond armor, there's a creeper standing in the middle of the room. He turns around and comes toward me, softly hissing.

"What on earth are you doing here?"

Startled, I turn around. Sister Carol stands at the office door, shining a flashlight in my face.

"Please, I only need a few more minutes! This is ..."

There's a bang. A message on the computer screen tells me that I just died. While I was distracted, the creeper exploded next to me. Game over.

"Take your hands off the computer!"

I hold up my hands. "I just wanted to ..."

Sister Carol's voice is frosty. "I assume you're aware that it's strictly forbidden for patients to enter the office, especially during resting hours!"

I get up, my head bowed. "Yes, Sister Carol!"

"You think you're special? You think this is some kind of hotel or something? I'm not going to put up with such

nonsense! A night in the Soothing Room, and you're going to feel much better!"

She leads me down the short passage, opening the door with a key card. The corridor on the other side is brightly lit. I'm herded to a metal door with an observation window in it. A faded sign reads "Soothing Room."

Sister Carol opens the door. "Get in there! You're not coming out until you've completely calmed down!"

"But I am already calm, Sister Carol!"

"That's for the nursing staff to decide!" She flicks a switch on the wall outside the room. Neon lights reveal brightly colored cushioned walls. Rocking horses, toys, and butterflies are printed on the fabric. There's a mattress on the floor, with a small chair and table made of foam rubber next to it. Stuffed animals, dolls, and a few children's books are lying around. Children's songs are playing from hidden loudspeakers.

"Get in there!" the nurse commands.

"What ... what if I have to go to the bathroom?" I ask.

"There's a toilet and a sink in the corner." She points to a part of the room that's concealed by a curtain with a floral pattern. "There are cameras up there. If you want something, wave. Depending on whether someone notices you, a nurse will come. Don't overdo it, though, or the nurses will tend to ignore you. You can shout and cry as much as you want in here - nobody will hear you. Any questions?"

Speechless, I shake my head.

"Then get in!" Sister Carol gives me a shove, making me stumble into the room. The heavy door closes behind me, then is locked from the outside with a muffled click.

Dazed, I sit down on the mattress. I try to gather my thoughts, but with the children's songs squealing all the time, it's hard to focus. What does it mean that I could replay my own Minecraft fantasy on a computer in this nuthouse? Why was there a creeper in Simon's house? What's wrong with me? My thoughts turn in circles until I get dizzy.

"Old MacDonald had a farm ..." the hidden speakers blare. I cover my ears, but the song echoes in my head. The music makes me aggressive. I kick the foam chair against the wall, shouting in frustration. Unfazed, the children keep singing, as if making fun of me. I try to rip off a leg from the chair, just to change anything in the room. But the rubber is very tough and withstands all my destructive powers. Finally, I give up, curling up on the mattress. I close my eyes and press my hands to my ears.

"Five little ducks went out one day ..."

Tears well in my tightly shut eyes, wetting the mattress. I'm going to lose the last remaining traces of my mind in here!

"Marco?"

Startled, I sit up. For a moment, I thought it was Amely calling me. But it's Elfie, standing next to the mattress, looking at me with concern. Flabbergasted, I realize that the door is still shut tight.

"Elfie! How did you get in here?"

She smiles. "Walls are no hindrance for us spirits!"

Is that supposed to be funny? "Show it to me! Walk through that wall, right now!"

She looks offended. "I thought you would like some company!"

"Elfie, something is going on here. Can you tell me what's wrong with me?"

"Why should anything be wrong with you?"

"You, for instance. In the world I lived in up until recently, there were no spirits!"

Now I really offended her. "Just because you never saw one, doesn't mean we don't exist! If you don't like me to be here, I can -"

"Wait! I'm sorry. I'm just awfully confused. I don't know whether I'm dreaming all of this right now. Maybe I'm still lying in the hospital."

"In the hospital? Why do you think that?"

I tell her how I awoke from my coma, or at least I thought that I awoke.

"You were inside a computer game? Wow! That must have been cool!"

"Honestly, I can do without repeating that. It's not nearly as much fun as playing safely in front of a computer."

"How come you are here now?"

"Well, I talked to Dr. Johanson because ..." I falter, as an awful suspicion forms inside me. The gaudily colored walls, the children's songs, even Elfie's appearance suddenly make sense in a new, terrible way.

"Walk through the wall!" I command. "Right now!"

She looks at me in confusion. "What?"

"I said, walk through the wall! I want to see it! You are a spirit, aren't you?"

"Yes, but ..."

"Just do it, if you can!"

"Well, you know ... we ... we don't like to do that if someone watches. It's a little embarrassing, if you know what I mean." Elfie manages to blush.

"Yeah, sure! Do you really think I'm that stupid?" I turn around, talking in the direction of the corner where I suspect a camera to be hidden. "Do you all think I'm a complete fool? You want to drive me insane! You want to discredit my testimony in the trial against Dr. Shelley! But you'll never succeed!"

"Marco, what's wrong with you?" Elfie asks.

"What's wrong with me?" I shout. "I finally saw through your masquerade, that's wrong!"

"I don't understand ..."

"You are one of them. All the other patients probably aren't really crazy. Karl, Sir William, you, you're all just actors. They hired you to make me believe I'm insane! I must admit it's a clever ploy. You even reconstructed the game in my head in astonishing accuracy. Dr. Johanson must have injected some kind of truth serum into me, so unknowingly I gave him every detail he needed. Quite an effort, just to get rid of an inconvenient witness. But then, we're talking about attempted murder!"

Elfie has tears in her eyes now. She's quite a good actress, I have to give her that. "No, Marco! It's not like that! I am -"

With a loud noise, the door is unlocked and Sister Carol enters the room, accompanied by a brawny, bald-headed nurse whom I haven't seen before. She holds a syringe. "It's enough now, Marco! If you can't calm down by yourself, we have to pacify you. Bertram, hold him!"

The nurse grabs my arms from behind, his hands like steel claws. Elfie looks shaken. Neither Sister Carol nor the nurse seems to take note of her.

"I'm sorry, Marco!" she says.

"Leave me alone!" I snarl. "When I get out of here, I'll make sure that my mother will sue you for ..."

A brief, sharp sting on my arm, and suddenly all the strength leaves my body as if someone pulled a plug. My legs become all wobbly, so that I'd fall down on the spot if the nurse didn't hold me upright. The gaudy colors begin to blur, mixing into a muddy gray that slowly fades to black.

I start from sleep. Warm sunlight floods the room through the pulled curtains. There's a sore place on my right cheek, where I've slept on a corner of *The Neverending Story*.

Confused, I look at my watch. Shortly after four o'clock in the afternoon. Why am I here and not in the padded room? Was my nightly excursion to the office just a dream? On closer consideration, that makes sense: Sir William appearing out of nowhere just when I need him, opening the locked door without difficulty; the exact replica of my dream journey through Minecraft in the computer; Elfie mysteriously appearing.

But it felt so real!

Maybe it's some kind of aftereffect of my coma that my dreams feel more real than before. Maybe it was a mixture of dream and hallucination. Whatever, I'm hungry, and have to go to the bathroom.

After I've relieved myself, I walk into the recreation room. The table where we played Snakes & Ladders this morning (was it really this morning?) is now occupied by three other patients playing cards: an old lady in a gray turtleneck sweater, a young man with a bloated face, and an older man wearing an old-fashioned hat and a bathrobe.

"Trumps!" the man with the hat exclaims, throwing a card on the table. "Hearts are trumps!"

"But you just said, clubs are trumps," the woman objects.

"But now hearts are trumps! I win!" The man grabs the cards on the table.

"Y-you ... che-cheater!" the younger man stutters.

I turn toward the other patients. Most of them are sitting in front of the TV, watching an old Disney movie - *Sleeping Beauty*, as far as I can tell. Elfie is among them, gnawing her nails as if she can't stand the suspense. Even the self-proclaimed prophet Ismalda stares at the screen as if she expects to receive her next revelation from the cartoon characters. Sir William and Karl are nowhere to be seen.

"Elfie, can I talk to you for a minute?"

She looks at me in surprise. "Marco! Where have you been? You missed lunch!"

"When we played Snakes & Ladders, that was this morning, wasn't it?"

"What do you mean? When else should it have been?"

"Psst!" A man of undefinable age turns toward me, looking upset. "The evil witch is about to appear!"

"You're not supposed to tell, you buffoon!" the woman next to him hisses.

"You're the evil witch!" the man replies. "Old witch, you!"

"I'll tell Nurse Ralph! He's going to ..."

I leave the patients with their cartoons and enter the passage to the nurse's office. Ralph still sits at his desk. As I open the door, he looks up.

"What do you want now?"

"Can I please make a phone call?"

"I already told you this morning, the patient's phone is in the recreation room!"

That's all I wanted to hear. Still confused, but also a little reassured, I go back to the common room. However, the feeling of calm doesn't last very long. As I glance out of

the window, I see a creeper and a zombie walking through the park!

Not again! I close my eyes, count to three, and open them. To my relief, instead of Minecraft monsters, I now see Karl and Sir William, apparently in deep discussion. Just as I ask myself how they got there without being accompanied by nursing staff, Sister Carol and another nurse run toward them. I shudder as I recognize the man: It's the muscular baldheaded guy from my dream!

I moan, feeling as if I'm losing my grip on reality. I sit down on a chair.

"Are you feeling unwell?" the old woman with the turtleneck sweater asks.

I shake my head, half to say no, half to clear my mind.

"The nurse outside, what's his name?" I ask.

"You mean Bertram?"

"Yes, exactly."

"What about him?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to know his name."

"He's called Bertram," the old lady says, turning back to her card game.

Not a minute later, Sister Carol, Karl, Sir William, and Bertram enter the room.

"That's the last time I tolerate such disobedience!" the female nurse scolds. "Next time, you both go to the Soothing Room!"

"I'm going to report you to my superiors!" Sir William replies. "This will have dire consequences! You'll see! I'm subject to diplomatic immunity, after all!"

"Psst!" says the man on the sofa. "There's a movie on!"

"I've already seen it," Sir William replies, but still sits down on a chair.

"If you give any spoilers, I'll spit on your dinner!" the woman on the sofa says.

The nurses leave the room. Karl winks at me and sits down with me at the table.

"Everything all right?" he asks.

"How ... how did you get outside?"

"Through the door, how else?"

"I mean, isn't it supposed to be locked? Don't you need a key card or something?"

Karl reaches to the neighboring table, grabs a playing card from the stack and hands it to me. It's a queen of hearts. "There, you have a card."

"Hey, hearts are trumps!" the man with the hat protests. Karl just ignores him.

Puzzled, I look at the card. With the long, curly hair, the queen resembles Amely a bit. I put it in my pocket.

Karl grins. "Have trust. Everything's going to be all right!"

"When we played Snakes & Ladders, that was this morning, wasn't it?" I ask.

"Time is relative," Karl replies cryptically. "When you read a book, years can go by in minutes. If you put it away, time stops. At least in the book."

I shake my head. Whether it is Dr. Johanson's intention or not, if I spend too much time with the patients in this nuthouse, it's going to drive me crazy sooner or later. So I go back to my room and try to make sense of everything. Why am I here? Why has my mother left me in Dr. Johanson's custody? What did he tell her? That I'm insane?

Am I?

I do have dreams and hallucinations that feel way too real. Something's wrong with me, that much is obvious. It

must be some aftereffect of the coma. Maybe it's better if I stay here for a while. All my fears are probably unfounded, and Dr. Johanson only wants to heal me. But I can't dispel my uneasiness completely.

I try to distract myself by reading *The Neverending Story*. For a while, I lose myself in the tale of Atreyu's search for a way to stop the mysterious Nothing that's destroying the world Fantastica, and of Bastian, secretly sitting in the attic of his school, unaware of how deeply he is entangled in the story he's reading.

Around six o'clock, Elfie knocks at the door. "Would you like to have supper?"

Because of missing lunch, I'm quite hungry, so at the patients' dining table I ignore Sir William's warnings about drugs in the food and enjoy even the dried-up bread with cheese that's being served to us.

After dinner, Sister Carol announces that we'll play some games "in honor of our new guest." However, this prospect doesn't seem to excite anybody. The reason for that becomes clear when Sister Carol explains the games to us.

The first game is called Search. Right in front of us, the nurse "hides" chocolate eggs around the recreation room. Then each of us is asked to search for an egg. If one doesn't go to a hiding place straight away, the Sister helps with hints like "hot" and "cold." If one finds an egg, everyone applauds dutifully.

I play the fool, ignoring the egg under the sofa that Sister Carol wants me to find.

"Cold!" she hisses, irritated. "Colder! When I say 'colder,' you're supposed to look in the other direction!"

When the other patients start to give me hints as well, I end the charade and pick up the egg, for which I get applause from everyone.

The next game is even more stupid: Hit the Pot. In contrast to the piñata games I played at birthday parties when I was young, we don't wear blindfolds. Instead, we sit on the floor in a circle, the pot in the middle. Each gets a spoon. Then we take turns hitting the pot, each player just one more time than the person before him.

Again, I don't play by the rules. After Elfie, who sits next to me, has hit the pot six times, I stop after three whacks of my spoon.

Everyone stares at me.

"Are you finished already?" Sister Carol asks. When I don't react, she asks the others: "Who counted? How often should Marco have hit the pot?" More than one hand raises, including Elfie's.

I've had enough. "Have fun!" I shout, throwing my spoon at the wall.

"P-p-party p-p-p-pooper," the young man with the bloated face shouts at me. The others quietly watch me storming out of the room. I half expect Sister Carol and another nurse to come to my room and drag me to the Soothing Room, but they leave me alone.

I have to get out of here! But how? The window has no knob, so I can't open it. I could try to smash it, but the noise would call the nurses' attention. Besides, the park surely is surrounded by a high fence. I remember driving through a large gate when we came here. However hard I think, I can't come up with a solution.

My mind wanders off to Amely. Is the fact that she hasn't replied to me since Sunday related to my being held

here? Is she in similar trouble? If so, I must help her somehow.

It's getting dark outside, but I'm not tired at all. Restless, I run around my room like a caged tiger. Finally, I can't stand it anymore. Quietly, I open the door to the corridor, which lies dark and silent. The recreation room is empty as well. Only the TV is running, like always. I cross the room and enter the passage on the other side. The office behind the glass door is dark.

A strong feeling of déjà vu washes over me. Everything is exactly like I dreamed it this afternoon! The glass door is locked, like I expected it to be. But there is no Sir William coming to pick the lock for me, and I have nothing with me in order to give it a try myself.

On impulse, I press against the door at the end of the passage. It doesn't budge. I regard the card reader next to it. In action movies, the hero sometimes has some kind of gadget that he can connect to the lock, using it to figure out the code that opens the door. But I'm not an action hero. All I have is a playing card, given to me by a patient who thinks he's God.

What the heck! I take the card and slide it through the card reader.

A small green LED lights up and the door springs open.

Without moving, I stare at it for a minute. This can't be! This *mustn't* be! I can't be dreaming again, can I? Have I ever been awake? Is all my life nothing but an illusion after all?

Fed up with all this confusion, I decide to quit thinking about what's real and what isn't. When I was trapped in the Cubeworld, in the beginning I didn't know that the world wasn't real. I just acted as if everything I saw was true, and

in this way I finally found the exit. Or at least the way into this world, wherever I am now. If I want to get ahead, I've got to do it the same way - don't think, just act!

So I step through the door, into another corridor. As I turn to close the door behind me, I see a sign attached to it:

Closed station - always follow safety instructions!

1. Entry only allowed accompanied by a member of the nursing staff.
2. Always have a pacification injection ready.
3. Don't aggravate patients; don't object to what they say.
4. Unruly patients should be pacified and moved to the Soothing Room.
5. Only use physical force as a last means in case of an emergency.

This sounds as if we patients were wild animals!

The moment I think that, a door opens behind me, and there's a noise like the neighing of a horse played on double speed. As I turn around, I see an incredibly ugly large bird with gray feathers and a bald pink head, with a kind of trunk hanging down over its beak. A turkey!

Again, the animal emits its strange sound that appears to be full of reproach. It stares at me with dark, evil eyes.

Didn't I just decide to stop doubting what I see? Easier said than done!

"Good evening, Sister Carol!" I say. "I've got to go now, I'm afraid. Good-bye!"

The bird emits an indignant blare, but makes no move to stop me as I pass it on my way to the entrance of the clinic.

The reception desk is empty. To the left, there's a large glass door leading out to the parking lot and a narrow road. The door is unlocked.

Cool night air greets me as I leave the building. A pale moon casts its light over the surroundings. I have no idea where I am and how to get home, but I can think about that later. My first priority is to get off the clinic's premises.

Again, I can hear the turkey's call from the inside. I run down the driveway to the gate, which stands open. Before I reach it, I hear a low growl behind me.

I turn around. A giant mastiff stands there, its teeth bared, menacing eyes sparkling in the moonlight.

"Down, Bertram!" I command. "Down!"

The dog shows no inclination of following my orders, snarling at me instead. It is one thing to deal with a turkey, but quite another to handle a dog that can easily tear me apart. Running away is no option, since the dog is no doubt much faster than I am.

To top things off, I hear a soft hiss behind me. As I look over my shoulder, I'm not even particularly surprised to see a creeper standing in the driveway.

Maybe now would be a good time to wake up from this absurd dream. I close my eyes and open them again, but all is as before, only the hiss has grown louder.

I dive to the side, between two parked cars. In the next instant, the creeper explodes. The windows of the cars burst, showering me with small glass fragments. A couple of car alarms go off.

As I gather myself up, I see Bertram the mastiff running away, howling. Nothing remains from the creeper.

Brushing shards of glass off my clothes, I walk through the clinic's gate without hesitation.

The clinic is located in a wealthy suburb of expensive houses with large front lawns. At this time of night, the streets are empty. I've got neither the means nor the money to call a cab, so there's no other option than walking, without even knowing which direction is home.

I try not to think about the fact that I've only escaped the nuthouse because a creeper exploded and drove a nurse turned into a dog away. Sometimes I have the feeling that something is lurking in the shadows. When I turn around, I half expect to see a skeleton or creeper, maybe even an enderman. But I reach the broad main road undisturbed.

When I see a cab drive by, I wave. The car stops.

"Aren't you a bit young to be running around alone this late at night?" the elderly driver asks as I get in.

Instead of answering, I just tell him my home address. Without a word, he turns on his meter. I can only hope that Mom won't be mad at me. But I don't think she'd want me to stay in the clinic against my will, without any means of contacting her. Dr. Johanson must have told her all kinds of nonsense. She probably thinks they're treating me well and only want to help me.

Finally, the car stops in front of our house. "That's twenty-four dollars and fifty cents," the driver says.

"I don't have any money with me," I admit. "Just wait here for a minute, and I'll get it from my mom."

The driver looks at me in the rear mirror, raising an eyebrow. "Haven't I heard that one before! I'll tell you something: We're both going to talk to your mom. If you try to run, I'll call the police. Get it?"

"Yes, okay."

He turns off the car and gets out. I ring the doorbell, but nobody answers.

The driver frowns at me. "What now?"

"M-mom seems to be asleep. Have you got a cell phone?"

He grumbles something, fetching an outdated phone from his pocket. I tell him our number. He dials, listens for a while, then cuts the line. "Answering machine," he says. "Have you got an identity card with you?"

"Unfortunately, no. Please, you must believe me. I do live here! You'll get your money, I promise. I just need to wake up my mom somehow."

"And if she's not home?"

"Where else would she be?"

"How would I know?" He looks at me skeptically. "What kind of stunt is this? You've run away from somewhere, haven't you?"

"No, really, I ... I was at a party, but ..."

"Cut that crap! I'll tell you something: You're going to explain to me what really happened, and then I'll see if I can help you. I was young myself, and I've pulled off some shenanigans in my days. But you've got to be honest with me, or I'll hand you over to the cops right away!"

"All right -" I begin, but he interrupts me.

"Let's sit down in the car. Standing around in the cold is a bit uncomfortable."

So I get into the passenger seat and begin to tell him my tale. "There's this girl in our school, Amely. She always seemed a bit strange. Then one day I talked to her ..."

The driver listens without interrupting me. I'm so lost in my narration that I only notice the emergency lights when

the ambulance stops right in front of our house. Alarmed, I turn to see two men getting out. One of them is Nurse Ralph.

Instinctively, I duck down in my seat. "Drive on, please!" I say.

The driver turns around as well. "Those guys are here because of you?"

"Yes. They held me in that clinic against my will! The psychiatrist, Dr. Johanson, is in cahoots with Amely's stepfather. I'm sure my mother has no idea what they did to me!"

The driver looks at me critically. "Listen, kid, I can't do that. Obviously, there's something wrong with you. I'm a taxi driver, not a doctor. Your story of this girl who was mistreated by her stepfather, and the strange things you experienced during your coma - I'm sorry, but that's too deep for me. We're both going to talk to these guys right now. I'm sure they mean no harm to you!"

Before I can object, he opens the door and gets out.

I see his wallet lying between the front seats. The friendly driver doesn't deserve it, but I have no other options. Quickly, I pluck some dollar bills out of the wallet, stuff them into my pocket, and get out as well.

"There's the rascal!" Ralph shouts. "Come on, let's get him!"

"Wait a minute!" the driver says. "First, I want to know what's going -"

The nurses ignore him, coming slowly toward me. "Calm down, boy!" the other nurse says. He's large, with blond hair, and holds a syringe. "Everything's going to be all right!"

"I'm sorry!" I say to the driver. "I'm going to pay back everything, I promise!" Then I run.

There's shouting behind me: "Just a minute! Who are you? What do you want with the kid?"

"Get out of my way, you fool! This is a medical emergency!"

"Not so fast! First, I - hey, what's with you? You can't just give me a shot ..."

I miss the rest of the argument, because at this moment I run into a side street. To the right is a passage to an inner courtyard that borders on our house. Mom has rented a parking space there. As I cross the courtyard, I see that her car is gone. Quickly, I hide behind some trash cans, with not a second to spare.

"Where's the brat?" the second nurse calls from the street.

"No idea," Ralph answers. "He probably got away. That stupid taxi driver! But did you really have to give him a shot of fentanyl? When he wakes up, he's going to cause a lot of trouble!"

"Nonsense. He doesn't even know who we are. Just shut up and help me find the boy!"

"All right. You go down there, I'll have a look at this inner courtyard."

Ralph enters the courtyard. Only thirty feet away from my hiding place, he stops, looking around. My heart beats so loudly I'm sure he must be able to hear it.

"Come out, boy!" the nurse shouts. "I know you're here. I promise we won't harm you!"

As I silently crouch in the shadows of the trash cans, I see a movement to my left. A black cat approaches me. Its

eyes seem to glow purple, but that must be just a strange reflection.

Buzz off! I don't dare say anything, so I just think the words as hard as I can. The cat moves its tail as it comes closer bumping against an aluminum can that dropped from the trash, causing a loud noise. Of course, this attracts the attention of the nurse.

I try to scare the animal away by hissing softly through my teeth. The cat stops, looking at me with a tilted head. I increase my hissing. Suddenly, I realize that it sounds just like a creeper about to explode.

The cat raises its hackles, leaps backward, and scurries across the courtyard, almost hitting Ralph, who cries out in alarm.

"What's up?" the other nurse shouts from the entrance. "Have you found him?"

"No. Just a stupid cat!"

"Then come on and help me look over here. He can't have gotten far!"

Ralph leaves the courtyard. I exhale in relief, but stay in my hiding place, watching the windows of our flat, which remain dark. After a while, I hear car doors banging, then a car driving off. Finally, I get up. My limbs hurt from sitting still in such an uncomfortable position. I consider asking our neighbors about Mom, but that would probably only cause more trouble. Whatever is going on, I better not trust anybody.

What then? I could stay here, waiting for Mom to come home. But what if the nurses come back, or even call the police? Going to my father, who's living in another city a few hour's drive away, isn't an option. I know he wouldn't believe me and would call Dr. Johanson right away. There

are a few friends of mine living nearby, but their parents wouldn't allow me to hide there for long either.

So there's only Amely left. If she's still with her grandparents in the mountains, I'd be safe there. They won't let the nurses take me away. And if she isn't there anymore, maybe I can at least find out where she went, and why she isn't answering my texts.

But how do I get there? All I know is that Amely's grandparents live on a solitary farm in the mountains, near a village called Hinslow. I have no idea how far away it is, but it must be at least a couple hundred miles.

I walk to the next bus stop and take the night bus to the central station. It's close to midnight when I get there. I buy a ticket with the money I stole from the taxi driver, which makes me feel guilty. I have no idea how to pay him back - I don't even know his name.

The next train goes early in the morning. I'm afraid I'll get questioned by the security staff if I just sit here until then. So instead I wander around and try to look like I'm on my way home.

Near dawn, I call home from a public phone, but only get the answering machine. I leave her a brief message: "Hi, Mom, it's Marco. I'm okay, don't worry. I don't trust Dr. Johanson, so I ran away from his clinic. I'll call you again along the way."

I don't have much money left, but it's still enough for a sandwich and a Coke. As I finally sit in a compartment of a railroad car and the train leaves the station, I heave a sigh of relief. After the conductor checks my ticket, the monotonous rattle of the rails soon lulls me to sleep.

Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat ... the rails clatter beneath the mining wagon as I am riding through the torchlit tunnel at top speed. Amely is sitting in another wagon only a few feet away in front of me. I try to get nearer, but hers is dashing down the rails at the same speed as mine.

Suddenly, the rails make a sharp downward turn. I feel sick as I'm weightless for a few moments.

"Amely!" I shout. "Amely, stop! I need to talk to you!"

But either she can't hear me, or she ignores me on purpose.

We approach a switch in the track. Amely's car turns left, but without any apparent reason, I continue straight ahead. I watch her move a few blocks away, before her tracks turn again to the right. Now we're moving through a giant cave on parallel tracks.

"Amely!" I shout, as loudly as I can.

She turns her head toward me. Only now do I realize that she doesn't look like a Minecraft figure - she's a real human being, right in the middle of the Cubeworld. A very sad human being.

She says something.

"What?" I ask.

"Wake up!" she calls.

I don't understand what she means, but I don't have time to think about it. As I turn in the direction I'm traveling, I see that we're heading toward a deep chasm, with lava boiling at its bottom. While Amely's rails lead across it, over a bridge, my own track ends abruptly in the middle of the gorge.

"Wake up, Marco!" she shouts one last time. "Wake up!"

I want to answer something, anything, but I'm only able to cry in despair as I fall down into the fiery abyss.

* * *

As I wake up, my cheek tingles from where I lay against the window in an uncomfortable position. A man in a dark suit sits across from me, staring at an open laptop on his knees. There's a soft violet glow in his eyes. Must be reflections from the screen.

He looks up at me. "Are you all right? You moaned in your sleep."

"I had a nightmare. Sorry if I disturbed you."

He smiles thinly. "Never mind. Where are you traveling to?"

"To ... my grandparents. Into the mountains."

"That's a long journey."

"Yes," is all I answer. The landscape outside is flat as a pancake. My watch tells me it's been just an hour since I left the station.

"Don't you have any luggage?" the stranger asks.

"My grandparents have everything I need. They pick me up at the station."

"I see." The man turns his attention to his laptop. While he strokes the keys, his lips move silently, as if he's murmuring magical spells.

For some reason, I'm feeling uncomfortable in his presence, so I excuse myself and leave the compartment. After wandering through the train for a while, I sit down in another compartment in the next car. The other occupants are a married couple who are quarreling all the time

without taking notice of me, just like my parents before they got divorced. It seems reassuringly normal to me.

After changing to another train, I finally reach the station at Hinslow. What now? Somehow, I trusted that I'd know what to do once I'm here. But as I stand in the tiny station, I have no idea where to go. I've got a few coins left, barely enough for one or two phone calls from an outdated coin-operated public phone.

First, I try to reach Amely, but again I only get her voice mail. My mother doesn't answer the phone either. I leave her a message, claiming I'm all right.

In front of the station, there's a map of the town. Luckily, Hinslow seems to be quite small. I remember a photograph Amely sent me, taken while she was milking a cow. Too bad I haven't got my cell phone with me. All I know is there was a large house in the background with a wooden balcony and shutters painted green, with a gray stable or barn next to it. Not great landmarks, but the best I can probably do is walk around, looking for them.

So I just follow the street that's leading away from the station. It runs parallel to a creek through a narrow valley, flanked on both sides by steep, rocky mountainsides. There are meadows and farm buildings, all looking similar to the one on Amely's snapshot.

It starts to rain. It's already cool up here in the mountains, and I'm not wearing anything that can protect me from the cold or wet. While I consider just ringing the doorbell at the next house, asking for Amely, a car passes me, splashing me with water from a puddle. The car stops a few yards from me, the passenger door opening.

Not knowing what to expect, I walk toward it. I can hear Mom's voice in my head: Never climb into the car of a

stranger! But I'm not a small child anymore, and I'm drenched and lost. I could do with a little help.

As I almost reach the car, I see something square and green shimmering through the rear window. Is there a creeper sitting in the back of the car? No, it's just a pillow.

The car belongs to a woman with a round face that seems kind and a dark ponytail. She's about Mom's age.

"What are you doing out here in the rain, kid?" she calls. "And without even a coat! You're going to catch a cold! Come, get in!"

Relieved, I sit in the passenger seat. "Thank you! That's very nice of you!"

She pulls away from the side of the road. "Where are you going, all alone, and in this weather?"

"I'm not sure." Sitting in the warm, dry car, I realize how cold and wet I am. I feel bad about dripping on the seat.

"What do you mean, you're not sure? You haven't run away from home, have you?"

"No. I'm here to visit a friend, Amely Shelley. She's with her grandparents. Unfortunately, I've forgotten their names. All I know is that they're living on a farm up here near Hinslow. They said they'd pick me up at the station, but something must have gone wrong."

"Hmm ... there's no family named Shelley around here. Don't you have a cell phone?"

"I tried to call them, but they won't answer."

"Why don't you come with me to our home? You can dry your clothes there, and then we can try to find your friend together."

"That's very nice of you, ma'am!"

"You're welcome. My name, by the way, is Margaret Brown."

"I'm Marco."

"Do you have a last name as well?"

A sudden impulse prevents me from telling her the truth. "Yes, of course. My name is Miller. Marco Miller."

"And where do you live, Marco Miller?"

"Um, in New York." I've been there once, with my parents. I remember standing at the top of the Empire State Building, looking over Manhattan, imagining I was King Kong.

"Oh, I see. A good friend of mine lives there. She speaks a little differently than you."

"Well, we moved there only two years ago," I improvise.

The curiosity of the woman is probably natural and understandable; she picked me up alone on the road, after all. Still, I feel uncomfortable talking to her. She seems to sense it, and stops asking me questions.

After a while we leave the main road and drive down a narrow lane leading to a small farm. There's a wooden main house, painted light gray, and a large barn with a big tractor standing in front of it.

"Here we are." Mrs. Brown gets out and leads me into a large, very cozy kitchen. The smell of fresh bread and spices greets me. She points to a large bench in the corner.

"Sit down. I'll see if I can find some dry clothes of Jake's. That's my son. He went to the city to study engineering." She leaves me alone.

I look at the photographs of strangers on the wall. A boy of my age, wearing a baseball cap and holding a bat, smiles at the camera - Jake maybe, a few years ago. Suddenly I hear a soft voice. Mrs. Brown seems to be calling someone

on the phone. I can't hear what she says, but something in her tone makes me alert.

Cautiously, I open the kitchen door and listen. The voice comes from the second floor. I walk to the foot of the stairs and get a few words of the call: "Miller, he said. Marco Miller, supposedly from New York ... no, I don't think so either ... probably ran away from home ... Yes, okay. See you soon."

Panicked, I look around. Next to the front door, there's a raincoat hanging on a hook. As I hear the steps of Mrs. Brown approaching the stairs, I grab the coat, open the door as silently as possible, and sneak out of the house. Behind me, the door closes with a noise. She must have heard it.

I run toward the barn. Just as I reach it, I hear her shout behind me, "Stop, you rascal! Are you going to thank me for my help by stealing my husband's coat?"

As I race around the corner, I realize that I've stolen something for the second time. Is it so easy to become a thief? Are they all as desperate as I am? It's too late for regret, and by the way, I'm not really sorry, for it's still raining heavily. I'll give the coat back as soon as I can - it's too large anyway.

Behind the barn, there are wide meadows. On one of them, a herd of cows huddles together in the rain. I jump over the fence and run across the meadow, almost falling twice after stepping into big, slippery cow pats. My sneakers are ruined, but that's the least of my problems now, for I can see a police car approaching a few hundred yards away. It turns toward the farmhouse.

Farther uphill, beyond the fence on the far side of the meadow, is a wood of pine trees. Maybe I can hide up there.

The cows look at me with large eyes as I run past them. As I try to jump over the fence, I slip in the wet grass. I barely catch myself on the fence with one hand.

A powerful jolt surges through my whole body. It feels like being touched by a zombie, only more intense. Colorful lights dance before my eyes. I sink down to the ground, gasping.

"He's over there!" I hear Mrs. Brown shout. As I turn around, I see two policemen jump over the far fence.

I can't let them drag me back to the nuthouse! I get up, clear the fence, and run toward the woods.

"Stop, boy!" one of the policemen shouts.

Panting, I carry on. I've never been good at running, and the only way to go is uphill. But desperation gives me strength. As I reach the trees, I'm still a few dozen yards ahead of the policemen.

I run between low pine trees and shrubs, which aren't as thick as I'd wish them to be. My lungs burn, and my legs feel as if they're made of rubber.

"Stop, I said!" The policemen seem to be out of breath as well.

I carry on, but I can feel my strength leaving me. After about a hundred yards, I stop. My side hurts, my pulse races, and my lungs feel as if I'm breathing air that's a hundred degrees hot.

"He's over there!" one of the policemen shouts.

I try to mobilize my last power reserves, but I don't have any. Instead of moving, I just get dizzy, closing my eyes for a second.

When I open them again, the world has changed. The steep, uneven mountainside has turned into an orderly staircase made of stone and grass cubes, rectangular trees

rising above them. Down below, two zombies wearing police uniforms are approaching me.

"We almost got him!" one of them shouts.

These hallucinations are really annoying, but they have advantages. Suddenly, it's very easy to jump up the next step of the mountain, almost as if my cubic body is weightless. With a few leaps, I increase the distance from my pursuers.

"He's getting away! Hurry!" urges one zombie.

Without effort, I jump up the mountainside. I know this is a dangerous illusion. My real body must be beyond its limits. If I overdo it, I'll probably die of exhaustion.

The shouts of the zombies diminish in the distance. When I can't hear them anymore, I stop and look around. I'm now high up, looking over the valley and the village of Hinslow, which seems to consist of neat little cubic buildings. I can even see the railroad tracks, Minecraft-style. The mountainside still rises a few hundred more blocks above me.

Suddenly the world starts spinning around me. I sink into a dark whirlpool.

When I regain consciousness, I'm lying on the ground, shivering. Rain pours down on me. I feel like I have been run over by a tank, which then shifted into reverse gear to finish me off. It's dark, so I barely can see my hand in front of my face. I must have been lying here, unconscious, for hours.

I grope around me. The world has regained its familiar, irregular forms. I try to move on, but my feet seem to be made of concrete, and I am completely lost. After a few steps, I stumble over a rock and fall down, so I give up the idea of walking in the darkness and huddle under the

branches of a pine tree. Here at least I'm out of the rain, and the ground is soft and dry. With my back leaning against the tree trunk, I close my eyes.

"Unngh!"

I start. My heart beats wildly, before I realize that I must have misheard. I'm in reality. There are no zombies here, whatever my brain makes of the noises in the dark. It must have been an owl or something.

For a long time I just sit there in silence, listening in the darkness, but there's nothing other than the soft noise of the rain. Finally, I fall asleep.

When I awake, it's already daylight. Birds are singing around me. My dark dreams retreat behind the shrouds of oblivion. I don't know whether the world in them was cubic or not. My limbs are so stiff that for a moment I fear they are frozen. As I massage them, they start to tingle uncomfortably.

Slowly, I crawl out of my hiding place. My clothes are still damp, but the golden sunrays squeezing through the trees at least give the illusion of warmth, raising my spirits.

However, my mood sinks again as I think about my situation. The police are looking for me. I have no idea where to go now. My growling stomach reminds me that I haven't eaten anything since yesterday morning.

Trying to run away is useless. I should turn myself in. The police will question me, and then they will call my mother, who'll pick me up. Maybe I'll get punished for stealing the coat and the money from the taxi driver. But with any luck, I'll convince Mom that she shouldn't put me into Dr. Johanson's clinic again. When I tell her about all the lunatics in there - Karl, who thinks he's God, the self-proclaimed secret agent Sir William, Elfie the spirit, and the dreadful Sister Carol - she must see that I don't belong in that place. There's no need to tell her about the hallucinations, is there?

Whatever she's going to do with me, it's better than running around through the forest for days, with nothing to eat. In hindsight, it was idiotic to run away from the police. They only tried to help me, as the friendly woman did.

Filled with new hope, I walk down the mountainside. Shortly, the woods recede and I'm standing before a wire

fence like the one I clumsily fell into yesterday. There are cows on the meadow, but no house or barn to be seen.

For a painful moment, I fear that the world has changed during the night. But then I realize that this is simply a different pasture. Again, I have no idea where I am.

On the far side of the meadow is a narrow path. I follow it to the left, until I reach a farmhouse. It's not the one where Mrs. Brown lives, although it looks similar. There's another barn, and even another tractor.

I'm going to ask the inhabitants of this place to call the police, and to give Mrs. Brown her jacket back.

As I approach the front door, a girl of my age steps out. She has long, blond hair tied into a ponytail, and a freckled face. As she sees me, she frowns. "Who are you? And what on earth did you do to your clothes?"

Embarrassed, I look down at me. The oversized raincoat is covered with leaves and pine needles. My jeans are ripped and dirty, my formerly white and blue sneakers gray from mud.

"Are you the boy who ran away from home?"

I just nod.

"Cool! I'm Julia. Come on, we shouldn't be standing here in the yard, or my parents will see you!"

"I'm Marco." Surprised, I follow her. She leads me into an empty stable smelling strongly of cow dung. It's not as unpleasant as I would have expected.

"The police are looking for you, don't you know?" Julia says.

"Yes, I do. I'm actually here to turn myself in."

"Why did you run away in the first place?"

For a second, I hesitate. "I'm looking for a girl named Amely. She's visiting her grandparents. Unfortunately, I don't know their last name."

"You're here because of Amely?"

"You know her?"

"Sure! She was here quite often to play with me when we were younger. In recent years, she hasn't come anymore, until two weeks ago. I was very happy to see her again. We went riding together a lot." Her eyes widen. "Now I get it! You're the boy who was in the hospital! The one her stepfather wanted to kill!"

"Yes, I am."

"But why did you come here? She went home already on Sunday, because she had to go to school again."

I groan. All my efforts to find her were in vain!

"But she never came to school. That's why I'm here. Can you help me locate her grandparents? I need to talk to them."

"Sure. They live not far away. I'd show you, but I have to go to school." She looks me up and down. "You must be hungry. Wait here for a minute!"

"Okay."

Anxiously, I stand in the stable, imagining Julia's parents asking her who the strange boy was, then calling the police. Now that I finally know where to go, that would be really bad. So I'm relieved when she finally comes back.

"Sorry it took so long, but I had to look for a while to find something that might fit you." She hands me a pink sweatshirt with two kissing cartoon mice printed on it. "Don't look so flabbergasted. It's the largest I could find!"

"Um, thank you!"

She hands me a plastic bag. "There are some sandwiches in there and a bottle of milk. I've got to go now, or my parents are going to come looking for me. The way to the Forresters is down the cart track that starts at the meadow over there. Just follow it to the third farmhouse. It has green shutters. Good luck!"

"Thank you, Julia! I won't forget this!"

Before I even finish my sentence, she's off through the stable door.

I take off my wet shirt and sweater and pull on the pink sweatshirt. It's too short on my arms and I look ridiculous, but the feeling of something warm and dry on my skin is more than worth it. Then I devour the sandwiches, thick with slices of roast beef, lettuce, and mayonnaise. I never ate anything better in my life! The milk tastes different from the kind I drink at home, almost as thick as cream.

Strengthened and with renewed confidence, I put my wet clothes into the plastic bag and follow the track that Julia described. The farmhouses are some distance away from it, so nobody asks me who I am and what I'm doing here.

The house with the green shutters lies beyond an empty pasture. Crossing it, I reach the backside of the barn that was on Amely's snapshot. Cautiously, I look around the corner. The police might know by now who I am and why I came here. It would be really bad if they caught me before I could talk to Amely's grandparents.

Apart from a few chickens, the yard is empty.

The name Forrester is engraved next to the doorbell, so I'm at the right place. As I press the button, I can hear the sound of a gong from the inside, but nobody answers the

door. Apparently, no one is home, so all I can do is wait for the Forresters to come back.

Through the window next to the front door, I can see a kitchen that looks just as cozy as Mrs. Brown's. As I am about to turn away, I see something moving behind the half-open door on the far side of the room. There seems to be somebody in there.

Again, I ring the doorbell. After a few seconds, I knock at the door. "Mr. Forrester, I'm Marco, a friend of Amely's. Please open the door, I need to talk to you!"

There's no response.

As I walk around the house, I discover a small herb garden and a back door, which is slightly ajar. I open it, calling, "Hello? Is somebody home?"

Again, I get no answer.

For a moment, I hesitate. Entering a house uninvited is a crime. But Amely's grandparents will understand that I'm concerned about her.

The back door leads to a small storage room, from which I get into the kitchen, and then into the entrance hall. A large wooden staircase leads up the next floor, and a smaller one goes down into the basement.

"Mr. Forrester? Hello?"

There's a creaking noise upstairs.

"I'm Marco, a friend of Amely's," I shout. "She didn't come to school, and I'm worried about her. Do you know where she is?"

Again, I get no answer. Something's wrong here. Maybe the person I saw is a burglar!

Cautiously, I climb the stairs. There are three doors leading away from the landing. The first one opens into a large bedroom with a wooden balcony, the double bed

apparently unused. Behind the second door, there's a bathroom. Feeling like a detective, I touch the toothbrushes and towels. They are all dry.

The third door opens into a room with two separate beds, two chairs, an old-fashioned writing desk made of polished wood, and a large wardrobe painted with flowers. I can only guess that Amely and her mother lived here, but the room is tidy, as if unused for at least some days.

While I search for clues that Amely was here, I hear another creaking sound from the staircase. As I open the door, I can't believe my eyes: The being that's scurrying down the stairs has a green, rectangular body with a cubic head and four tiny feet.

I close my eyes in order to dispel the hallucination. When I open them again, the creeper is gone, but I can hear something scuttling downstairs. As quickly as I can, I run down the stairs and search the house. But the entrance hall is as empty as the kitchen, the storage room, the living room, and the small bathroom.

There's only the basement left to search.

With an uneasy feeling I turn on the basement lights and follow the narrow staircase down. There's an earthy smell that is strangely familiar.

At the bottom of the stairs is a corridor with two ordinary, white painted doors on the sides and another door at the end that's anything but ordinary. Its surface seems to be painted with small squares in five different shades of brown. Where the handle should be, there are only a few darker squares. Through the openings in the upper half of the door I can see a passage that's lit by torches.

Shaking my head, blinking my eyes several times, and pinching my arm, I try to dispel the illusion. But whatever I do, the door into the Cubeworld remains in place.

With a deep breath I try to grasp the handle and open the pixel door, but nothing happens. Pushing against it doesn't work either. Although it appears to be thinner than a sheet of paper, the door won't budge. I try to stick an arm through one of the openings, but I meet resistance as if there is a glass panel in it.

Of course, what I see must be an illusion, if a very persistent one. In reality, there's probably just a plain wall here.

As I'm about to turn and head back up the stairs, I can see the creeper coming around a corner of the passage on the other side of the Cubeworld door. It approaches me, but stops at the opposite side of the door, looking at me with its grumpy expression.

It's really difficult to turn away from this absurd spectacle. I finally manage to guide my attention toward the remaining rooms. One of them contains a furnace; the other is full of shelves stacked with cardboard boxes and all kinds of clutter.

As I step back into the corridor, the Minecraft door is still there, beckoning me. What does it mean? Where are Amely's grandparents? Why can't I dispel the illusion of this door, while all the other hallucinations vanished by themselves after a short time?

The sound of a gong interrupts my chain of thoughts. Startled, I run up the staircase and into the kitchen. Hidden by a curtain, I peek outside. Dr. Johanson and the muscular nurse Bertram are standing before the front door.

The gong sounds again. "Marco!" the psychiatrist calls. "Open the door. We know you're here!"

"I won't go back to the nuthouse!" I shout back through the kitchen window.

Both of them stare at me. There seems to be a violet shimmer in Dr. Johanson's eyes. "Come out, Marco, so we can talk!"

"Go away!"

"Marco, you are very ill. All we want to do is help you!"

"No!" I shout. "Just leave me alone!"

"You're seeing strange things, aren't you?"

I don't answer.

"You may think it's going to get better by itself. But it won't, believe me. While you were in coma, your brain was damaged. Since then, you're suffering from a condition called paranoid schizophrenia. You experience hallucinations, see scary things that aren't real. You think you're haunted by evil forces. That's the reason why you don't trust me. You may think I'm going to hurt you. But I won't, believe me! I am a doctor. I'm just trying to help you. Trust me!"

What if he's right? Am I really suffering from paranoia? Is my mistrust toward him caused by brain damage? While I'm still wondering whether I should open the door and resign myself to my fate, I see a movement outside.

Rats! I didn't watch Bertram! While I was talking to Dr. Johanson, he sneaked around the house. So much for trust!

Just as the nurse opens the back door, I run out of the kitchen.

"Stop, boy!" Bertram shouts.

In panic, I run down the staircase to the basement.

He chases after me. "Stop, darn it! You can't get away!"

He's probably right. But as I reach the foot of the stairs, there's a surprise: The Minecraft door at the end of the corridor stands wide open!

It's only a hallucination. If I try to run through it, I'll probably just bump into a wall. Still, I race toward it, holding my hands out before me.

As I reach the door, there's no resistance. There really seems to be a passage after all. But I hesitate, suddenly afraid of crossing the threshold into the Cubeworld.

As Bertram appears at the foot of the staircase, his expression changes. His anger is replaced by something that looks like real concern.

"Don't move, boy! It's dangerous!"

For me, it looks like there's a pixel passage leading a few blocks ahead before it makes a turn to the right. But what does Bertram see?

Slowly, he moves toward me, arms opened wide. "Easy, boy!" he says softly, as if talking to a toddler. "I'm not going to hurt you!"

Only one step, and I'll be in the Cubeworld again. But what's going to happen then? Will I lose my mind for good?

Just at this moment, the creeper appears around the corner, hissing softly. That decides it.

"All right, I'm coming with you. But I want to talk to my mother first!"

"Of course, boy!" the nurse says, grabbing my arm in a viselike grip.

One last time, I look at the Minecraft passage and the creeper, which seems to be sad to see me leaving. Then I let Bertram pull me up the stairs. Dr. Johanson is waiting for us. I'm not really surprised to see a syringe in his hand.

"I want to talk to my mother first!"

"You'll talk to her very soon," the psychiatrist says. "But first, you need to calm down." He shoves up the arm of the pink sweatshirt. I try to wriggle out of Bertram's grip, but I stand no chance against his Herculean strength, so I can't stop Dr. Johanson from injecting a clear liquid into my vein. Soon I sink into a warm, soft darkness.

"Old MacDonald had a farm, eee-eye-eee-eye-oh!"

The room I wake up in is colorful and brightly lit. I'm lying on a mattress, wearing light gray pajamas and a bathrobe of the same color. My head feels as if a creeper exploded in it.

"And on his farm he had some chicks, eee-eye-eee-eye-oh!"

The children's song jars my nerves. My mouth is dry. I get up and stagger toward the gaudy curtain that separates the toilet and a small sink from the rest of the room.

"With a cluck-cluck here, and a cluck-cluck there ..."

I drink greedily, splashing water all over my face.

"Here a cluck, there a cluck, everywhere a cluck-cluck ..."

When my head is finally a little clearer, I look around me. For how long have I been here? The Soothing Room has no window, and my watch has been taken away, so I don't even know what time it is.

Of course, the heavy metal door is locked. I hammer against it with all my strength.

"I want to talk to Dr. Johanson right now!" I shout, but the padded walls dampen my voice, making it hard even for me to hear it over the children's song.

My shouting and hammering makes my headache worse. I lie down on the mattress, pull the bathrobe over my head to shut out the bright light, and press my hands against my ears.

Sometime later, I can hear the door getting unlocked from the outside. I sit up. Sister Carol enters the room, carrying a tray. She smiles thinly, looking at me warily

while she puts down my food on the floor next to the mattress: a plastic plate with three slices of bread and jam, a small carton of milk with a straw in it, and a little plastic cup filled with pills.

"How are you, Marco?"

"My head hurts."

"Take the pills. They're going to help you."

"I want to talk to Dr. Johanson."

"He'll speak with you later."

"No, right now! He promised!"

Sister Carol shakes her head, as if unable to grasp my stupidity. "We don't talk to the nursing staff like that!"

Last time, she threatened to put me into the Soothing Room if I don't behave. I wonder what punishment is awaiting me if I don't behave in the Soothing Room. But I'm not really eager to find out, so I keep my mouth shut.

"The pills!" Sister Carol reminds me.

Obediently, I empty the cup into my mouth and wash down all the pills with milk in one big gulp. The nurse nods in satisfaction, then leaves me alone.

I realize that I'm quite hungry, so I eat the sandwiches and empty the milk. After a while, my headache vanishes. I feel tired, but also fine. Why was I so upset earlier? What was it that I wanted so urgently? I can't remember. Satisfied, I lie down on the mattress and listen to the children's songs. After a while, I start humming with the cheerful melodies.

When I wake up, the tray is gone. Strange, I didn't even realize that I fell asleep. I think I dreamed about toys and flowers and sweet things, but the memory dissolves in my head like mist in the morning sun.

As I look around me, I start. In the wall opposite to the entrance, there's a second door. Has it been there before? I don't think so, although I can't be sure. It looks strange, spotted with squares in various brown colors. It has four small windows, through which I can see a passage.

Amazed, I get up. I feel a little dizzy, so it's hard to stand upright. I stagger toward the door, touching it with my outstretched hand. Where a doorknob should be, there are just a few darker squares painted on it.

I think I saw such a door before. But where? My thoughts are sluggish, as if my head is full of strawberry jam.

The metal door behind me opens. I turn around to see a man with a beaked nose and a bald spot on his head enter the room. I think I have seen him before, but I can't remember when.

"How are you, Marco?" he asks.

Marco? Oh yes, that's me! I want to say I'm fine, but my tongue doesn't obey me, so I can only utter a long *Iiii*. Saliva runs down my chin while I try to speak.

"Uh-huh. Well. I'm glad that you're feeling better. Soon, you'll be able to go back to the normal station. But it's important that you take your pills regularly. You understand that, don't you?"

I nod my head eagerly.

"I see. Great. Here is your medicine." He hands me a small cup with colorful pills and a large cup with water. A small cup and a large cup, that's funny! I grin broadly.

A soft hiss sounds from behind me. As I turn around, I see a green box-like creature with a cubic head. Its eyes and mouth seem to be painted on the box in black

rectangles. It looks sad, making me want to embrace it in order to comfort it.

"Marco, your pills!" the man with the hooknose says.

I turn around, empty the small cup into my mouth, and drink the water. But somehow, not all of it fits into my mouth; water runs down my neck, wetting my pajamas.

The hissing behind me grows louder. The green being shakes its head, as if to say no.

"I'll leave you alone now," the man in the white coat says. I remember he's called Dr. Joe or something. I nod at him with a smile. Satisfied, he smiles back, turns around, and vanishes through the metal door.

After he leaves, the green thing and the strange door vanish as well. My mouth feels peculiar. That's probably because it is still filled with water and pills, which don't taste very good. The green thing didn't want me to swallow it all, so I didn't. The green thing seemed to be friendly, after all. I walk to the toilet, spit the pills into the bowl, and flush it. Then I lie down on the mattress and snuggle up against a big, soft teddy bear.

After a while, my head begins to hurt. The pain brings my memory back, together with the realization that I'm in a hopeless situation. I'll never get out of this mental hospital! If Dr. Johanson or Sister Carol find out that I'm not taking my pills, they'll just give me shots. But I don't want to fall back into that dull semiconscious state by any means! I don't want to forget who I am, like I did when I awoke in the Cubeworld.

I look around in the garishly colored room. Am I really here? Have I ever been anywhere else? It's still difficult to think straight.

After a while, the door opens and Dr. Johanson enters the room. I put on a stupid grin.

"Cut that out!" he says. "I know you haven't taken your pills. We can watch you, you know."

The grin leaves my face. "I want to talk to my mother!"

Dr. Johanson sighs. He sits down on the floor next to me, his legs crossed, and looks at me with a grave expression. "Listen to me, Marco. It's very important that you're listening closely."

"I'm listening."

"Uh-huh. I see. You won't believe what I'm going to tell you now, but it's true. It's very important that you at least try to believe me. It's a very painful truth. But you've been in here for so long now that I don't know what else to try but to confront you with it."

"How ... long have I been in here?"

"Four months."

"Four ... months," I repeat. That can't be. I was in the clinic for only two days before I fled. I don't know how long I lay unconscious after they brought me back, but that can't have been weeks, can it?

"I know it's hard to believe," Dr. Johanson says. "The medicine we had to give you is changing your perception of the flow of time, and your memories. But there was no alternative."

"Can I talk to my mother now?"

"Your mother is dead, Marco. She died in the accident that gave you your traumatic brain injury. You suffered from cerebral hemorrhage, which caused your coma. The doctors could barely save your life. When you woke up and they told you what happened, you tried to commit suicide. We had to sedate you and bring you here. Unfortunately,

the drugs we had to give you to stabilize your mental state have strong side effects. They can cause hallucinations and delusions that appear very real to you."

I stare at him. "You're lying!"

"Unfortunately not, Marco."

Tears fill my eyes. I blink them away. "You were at my home, remember? My mother led you to my room. The next day, she drove me to you. I lay down on your couch and fell asleep. Then I awoke here in your mental clinic."

"I see. Uh-huh. Well, that's not what really happened. You have been here the whole time since you left the hospital."

"What about my escape?"

Dr. Johanson frowns. "Escape?"

"I ran away from your institution and went to Hinslow, where Amely's grandparents live. There you and Nurse Bertram found me and brought me back here!"

"Who's Amely?"

"A girl from school. I told you about her. Her stepfather did bad things to her. When I confronted him about it, he gave me a shot and I fell into the coma!"

"Uh-huh. I see."

"That's how it was!" I shout. "I can't just have dreamed it all!"

The psychiatrist regards me silently, as if searching for the right words. "Uh-huh. Well. You know, our brain is a strange organ. Sometimes, when the truth is too awful, it constructs its own reality, like a suit of armor. Otherwise, we might be destroyed by our own desperation. But now it is time that you shed this armor and accept the facts, Marco!"

Tears stream down my cheeks. "What you tell me isn't true! It can't be!"

"Think logically, Marco! How do you think you got away from the clinic? We have a sophisticated security system here, and well-trained nurses."

I feel sick as I answer his question to myself: I opened the security door with a playing card I got from a man who claimed to be God. The nurses couldn't stop me, because Sister Carol had been turned into a turkey, and Bertram into a dog. To top it off, a creeper exploded in the parking lot. If it wasn't so terrible, I'd laugh out loud!

With big eyes, I look around the Soothing Room. My gaze is caught by the Minecraft door in the wall across from the entrance. An ice-cold shiver runs down my spine.

"What do you see, Marco?" Dr. Johanson asks.

"A ... a door," I sob.

"What kind of door? Where is it?"

"Over there, in the wall. It ... it leads into a computer game, I think."

"Marco, look at me!" Dr. Johanson says in an urgent voice. "There is no door! What you see isn't real!"

"I know."

"Whatever happens, you mustn't open that door, do you understand?"

I nod. I feel like someone opened a valve, draining all my energy like the air from a tire.

Mom, dead.

This simply can't be true!

"My dad. What about him?"

"Um, well, I don't know how to tell you this, Marco. He hasn't been here since you've been with us. We called him a

couple of times, and he promised to visit you, but each time something cropped up."

That fits. I thought he was at my hospital bed when I awoke from my coma. But in truth, he left me alone for good when he moved out years ago because of that other woman.

"I'd like to be alone now," I say.

"Yes, of course." Dr. Johanson stands.

"And please, turn off the music!"

"I see. Yes, okay."

He leaves the room. Soon after he's gone, the music stops. Holding my head in my hands, I sit on the mattress. After a while, I almost wish the music back. The silence within me roars like thunder.

Mom, dead.

I feel empty. I don't even have tears left inside me. The imaginary door beckons. Wouldn't it be easiest to just walk through it and submit to insanity, forgetting everything? Apparently, that's what I did during the last months. I ran away from the truth, but it has finally caught up with me.

After some time, maybe just a few minutes, maybe hours, I get up. My legs are wobbly, so I have a hard time standing upright. With all my willpower, I prevent myself from staring at the Minecraft door, while I stagger toward the sink.

I wash my face, dry it with the towel, and stare into the mirror. The boy looking back at me appears pale and tired. His eyes are red, the hair ruffled and knotted. There's no trace of a head injury, no scars on my face to be seen. Apparently I have been lucky, unlike Mom.

Desperately, I try to remember how it happened. It must have been a car accident. But where were we driving to? I

have no idea. The last car trip I remember was to a shopping mall, where Mom bought the jeans I was wearing when I came here. I mean, which I was wearing in the hallucination of coming here.

This is more than I can take!

When I shake my head in frustration, something falls out of my hair. Astonished, I pick up the tiny object and hold it up before my eyes: a single pine needle.

Sometimes, it's the small things that change everything.

I regard the pine needle, turning it in my fingers. I prick the back of my hand with it. It appears to be as real as the sink and the bathrobe I'm wearing. But if this needle was in my hair, I cannot have been inside the clinic for four months. I must have slept below the pine tree in the mountains, must have been in the house of Amely's grandparents, where Bertram and Dr. Johanson caught me. If the needle is real, Dr. Johanson lied to me.

I turn around. The pixel door is still there. If the door isn't real, then the needle isn't as well, whatever I see or feel.

After thinking about the problem for a while, I decide to perform an experiment. I sit down on the mattress, looking at the Minecraft door, while I wait. After some time, Sister Carol enters the room, carrying a tray with a plate of steak and mashed potatoes, a glass of apple juice, a yogurt for dessert, and a cup of pills.

"Why are you sitting there, staring at the wall?" she asks.

"What else can I do?"

"We don't talk to the nursing staff like that!"

As she bends down to place the tray next to the mattress, I take the needle out of the pocket of my bathrobe and prick her ear with it.

"Ouch!" Sister Carol drops one side of the tray and touches her ear. The food spills onto the floor.

"How dare you!" she scolds. "Look at this mess you made! Don't think for a minute that I'm going to fetch you

anything else to eat!" She storms out of the room, locking the door behind her.

Thoughtfully, I regard the small needle between my fingertips. I get up and reach for the door that can't be there. Dr. Johanson's voice echoes in my head: *Whatever happens, you mustn't open that door, do you understand?* Then I remember another voice, softer, friendlier: *Walk through the door.*

Only now do I realize what the prophet Ismalda meant when she said that.

I look at the pine needle one last time, before I flip it away. Taking a deep breath, I reach for the door. Before I even touch it, it springs open. An earthy smell emanates from the torch-lit passage.

Behind me, the heavy iron door is being unlocked.

"Marco, don't!" Sister Carol shouts. Together with the stout nurse Bertram, she rushes into the Soothing Room.

Gulping down my fear, I take a step forward, half expecting to touch the padded wall. But there's nothing preventing me from entering the passage into the Cubeworld.

Sister Carol and Bertram gasp, staring at me with widened eyes.

"Come ... come out of there, please, Marco!" she says softly. "Right now!"

Shaking my head, I close the door behind me. In my mind's eye, I can see a picture of myself. I have blue boxlike legs, a light blue rectangular torso, and squinting pixel eyes. Sister Carol and Bertram stare at me through the square openings of the door, their faces full of despair. I lift my oblong arm to wave at them one last time before I turn around and follow the passage.

After a bend, there's a torchlit staircase leading down.

Do you know where Amely is?

She's waiting for you.

Where?

At the end of the stairs.

Block by block, I jump down into the depths. It feels good to be back in the Cubeworld. Here I am much stronger than in reality - or whatever the world was that I just escaped from. After about twenty steps, the staircase leads into a narrow passage. There's no Amely waiting for me here, but that would have been a little too easy, wouldn't it?

I follow the passage for ten blocks before it turns to the right, then to the left, and again to the right, zigzagging through the Minecraft underworld. The walls are made up of stone, with the occasional earth or gravel block. Torches are attached to the walls at regular intervals. Sometimes, the passage leads a few steps down. Once in a while, I come across irregular small caves. I know this pattern from my own_games: Somebody dug here for resources, mainly coal and iron, because the valuable materials, like gold, diamonds, and redstone, are only to be found at greater depths.

Sometimes I can hear the rattle of skeletons or the moaning of zombies behind the walls. Luckily, I don't encounter any monsters, since I don't even carry a wooden sword.

While I'm walking through the passage, my doubts about my decision increase. Where am I, really? Am I still crouching in the Soothing Room, drooling, eyes rolling in their sockets, while my mind has left my body? Is Mom really dead? I can't believe that. I don't want to!

After a few more bends, I reach a crossroads. To the left, the tunnel ends after a few blocks. To the right, there's another staircase leading down. I decide to continue straight ahead, but soon run into a dead end, so all I can do is go back.

As I hop down the staircase, an uneasy feeling grows inside me. At the foot of the stairs is a small passage leading to a broader tunnel, three blocks wide and of the same height. At regular intervals, wooden pillars support the stone roof. There are remains of railroad tracks on the floor. Cobwebs at the walls and pillars indicate that these tunnels are inhabited by quite unpleasant dwellers. I have discovered an abandoned mine shaft!

That's at once good and bad news. Good, because there's wood here, so I can create a workbench, a wooden pickaxe, and then more tools. The bad news is that mine shafts can be quite large and easy to get lost in. Even worse, they are home to cave spiders, which are much more dangerous than their Overworld cousins. And I already get the jitters when I see a spider the size of a thumbnail in my bathroom!

As I step into the mine shaft, I can hear the spiders' characteristic hissing noises somewhere nearby. Now speed counts! Hastily, I hit the wooden pillars with my bare hands, until I have enough wooden boxes in my head to create a workbench. It feels strange to turn massive objects into mere thoughts, and the other way round. But I already know this from my earlier adventures in the Cubeworld.

I beat three more boxes out of the ceiling, divide one of them into four wooden sticks, and create a wooden sword. Not a moment too soon, for there's an eight-legged monster

with a blue-black body and red glowing eyes crawling toward me from around a corner of the tunnel.

Even when I play Minecraft on my computer, I hate cave spiders. They are smaller than their Overworld counterparts, but still much bigger than any spider has a right to be, each leg as long as my arm. The monster looks so real that I stare at it for a second, frozen in fear, instead of doing the smart thing and running away.

Taking advantage of my hesitation, the spider attacks. Terrifyingly fast, it crawls toward me and jumps at me. I can barely raise my wooden sword in time to hit it. The spider hisses indignantly, then attacks again. This time, I'm not quick enough. An electrical jolt runs through me, and suddenly I feel sick and dizzy. The eight-legged scum has poisoned me!

It's obvious that I can't win this fight with a mere wooden sword. After I parry another attack, I try to flee. But my sickness makes it difficult to see where I'm going, and my leg gets stuck in the cobwebs covering the passage. This is my doom. Before I can even turn around and raise my sword in defense, the spider jumps at me again, draining the last of my life force.

I should have heeded Dr. Johanson's words is my last thought, before I sink into darkness.

15.

Where am I? What am I? Am I anything at all? Questions spin through the void like sparks. At least, something must exist that can ask them, floating bodiless in black, empty space.

No, the void isn't completely empty. There's a single bright spot glowing in the distance, as if there's only one star in the entire universe. The spot grows, slowly at first, then faster and faster. It races toward me, or more precisely, I fall toward it. I recognize a room seen from above, people, a bed, a boy lying on it. His eyes are staring up, looking at me.

So this happens when you die, I think, while the eyes grow larger until one of them fills my field of vision: the iris an ocean, the pupil a dark abyss in the center. I plunge into it.

Blackness surrounds me, endless, empty space. No, not completely empty: A small spot of light glows, lonely in the distance. I fall toward it, until it grows into a rectangular form. A room, seen from above, but this one is smaller. A bed, a boy lying on it, alone, his eyes closed, an open book next to him. This is the room in the mental clinic, I realize, as I tumble down toward the sleeping figure. Suddenly, my mirror image opens his eyes wide. One iris grows into a cloudy ocean with a black maelstrom in its center, into which I sink.

Black emptiness. I look for a small, single point of light, but there's nothing. Motionless, I fall through endless space. This time, I see my target only when I'm much closer, because it is dark: woods, a single large pine tree at its center. I fall in the middle of raindrops glimmering

faintly in the moonlight, then I penetrate the treetop. Sheltered by the branches, there's a boy lying on the ground, wearing wet, dirty clothes. In the dim light, I can barely recognize his pale face. He opens his eyes.

Again, I plunge into emptiness, falling toward a bright spot. A colorful room with padded walls. I'm lying on a mattress, while at the same time I'm falling toward myself, sinking into my wide-open eye.

Endless blackness. A bright spot in the distance grows into a flickering square. A room, seen from above, the floor made of patchy wood. A rectangular figure lies on a bed. Its face, a brown, cross-eyed rectangle, doesn't resemble me in the least. Still, I tumble into one of the eyes, breaking through the blue pixel plane, so I'm once more engulfed by darkness.

This time, there's no bright spot. Instead, my surroundings slowly grow brighter. I'm lying on a bed in a room with walls made of stone and wood. A man is bending over me. He has a cubic head with squinting eyes, dotted with light-gray pixels that are probably supposed to depict a beard. His body is partly covered with white and gray spots, as if he is wearing a garment from ancient times.

"Ah, you're awake!"

"Simon?" I ask.

"Is that your name?"

"No. My name is Marco. I thought you were ... someone I knew."

"Whoever that Simon may be, I am not him. I am called Plato. At least, that's what they called me when I walked upon that other world, which is nothing but a distorted shadow of reality."

"Plato? The philosopher?"

"You heard of me? How flattering! Or maybe you're an incarnation of one of my students? Not that snotty brat Aristotle, I hope, who thought he knew everything? That's all I need - him pursuing me even beyond death! Anyhow, if you are him, you'll surely admit now that I was right: They exist, those absolute, imperishable ideas, the true forms, which are independent of all human interpretation! And of those forms, the most perfect one obviously is the square!"

What he's talking about is all Greek to me. I learned about Plato in school, but what business an old philosopher might have in my Minecraft hallucination is beyond me. Apparently, my subconscious has listened more closely in philosophy class than I did.

"Did I spawn here?"

"Did you what?"

"How did I get here? Did I simply appear in this bed?"

"No. I found you lying unconscious in the old mine and carried you here."

"Thank you!"

"Never mind. I was getting a bit lonely recently, so I count myself lucky to have found you."

I get up and look around the room. Pixel pictures decorate the walls. There's the standard furniture of any Minecraft house: an oven, a workbench, and two large chests. Through glass windows I can look out into a large cave lit by torches. Next to an underground river, there's a small patch of wheat.

"Not so fast, young friend," the pixel philosopher cautions. "You must still be weak."

He's right. I feel a bit dizzy, and very hungry. But I shake my head. "This isn't real," I say, more to myself.

Plato cackles. "Real? What's that supposed to mean? If you heard of me, you probably know one of my most famous writings, the *Politeia*? Surely you remember that in it, Socrates compares our perception of the world to shadows on a wall, projected by the real living beings outside the cave? And all the time, we humans are chained to a wall, unable to ever see anything of the world but those shadows, therefore taking them for reality?"

This guy obviously likes to hear himself talking. "I've got no idea what you're trying to tell me, but this here is certainly not reality. We're in a game. Or rather, in a hallucination of one."

"If that is so, who's playing the game, and whose mind did this delusion rise from?"

"I'm playing the game. And all this is happening only in my mind."

"Oho! So you believe me, Plato of Athens, to be just an imagination, a specter in a dream?"

"Exactly. You died more than two thousand years ago."

"But -what if it is the other way round? What if I'm dreaming up you, as another result of that strange fever that produced this whole world?"

"Then I couldn't think that I'm here, talking to you."

"Unless you thought you were you, but were in reality me, and all you see of me and yourself is mixed up."

"Nonsense! *I* think, therefore *I* am! And I'm certainly no old geezer wearing a towel around my tummy, babbling incoherently! I am Marco, fourteen years old, living in the twenty-first century A.D. The stepfather of my girlfriend has poisoned me. Now I'm lying somewhere in a coma, or maybe I'm already dead, dreaming of myself inside my favorite computer game. Nothing about this is real, neither

you and your house nor this strange boxlike body of mine, without hands and feet."

"Well, I could at least agree with you on that last statement. Only pure ideas are true and exist forever, independently of all matter and human perception. To recognize these truths has been my goal for all my life. After I died, the Gods sent me here into this world, which is much more abstract than the last one, and therefore closer to the absolute truth. So I can hope that each incarnation brings me closer to the true forms, until I myself become pure abstraction - nothing more, nothing less than a theorem of mathematics, the ultimate science."

Plato's twaddle makes my head hurt. "Fine. Go ahead and turn yourself into the Pythagorean theorem if you like. But I want to get out of here!"

"Out of here? You may escape this cave, young Marco, but not the delusions of your perception!"

I ignore his objection. "There must be someone else down here. A girl. Her name is Amely. Did you see her?"

"A girl! And I had thought you were looking for the truth, like me." He sounds disappointed.

"If you're looking for the truth, you're certainly not going to find it inside a computer game," I reply.

"Inside a what?"

"You don't know what a computer is, do you?"

"Some kind of demon? One of the Titans?"

How can I explain this to an ancient Greek? "It's a machine. It can calculate."

"A calculating machine! What great mind has dreamed up this miracle?"

"Charles Babbage, I believe. Or was it Alan Turing? Anyway, imagine that this machine can paint pictures that

show an imaginary world. It paints so fast that the pictures appear to move. You're seeing a world in which you can walk around freely. The machine reacts to everything you do, changing the environment accordingly. That's a computer game!"

"And your machine is calculating all that? The principles on which this world is founded are nothing but mathematical formulas and abstract ideas?"

"You could say so, yes. It's called a program."

Suddenly, Plato starts hopping around in circles, waving his arms in joy. "Eureka! Eureka! I found it! This is the proof I searched for all my life!" He tries to embrace me, which is difficult with his rectangular limbs. "How can I thank you, my young friend, who knows so much more about the nature of the world than this old fool?"

"Just help me find Amely, or an exit from this world!"

"All right. I'm not sure whether I'll be of much help, but I can at least try."

"Can you fight?"

"I'm old, but I'm not a weakling. At the academy I founded, physical exercises were mandatory. A sound mind can only exist in a healthy body, as we used to say. By the way, this boxlike body is simple, yet effective. I dealt with many a fiend. The walking dead are not a problem for me. I vanquished the treacherous green fellows carrying the fire of Hades inside them, although they sneaked up on me many times. And even the giant spiders are no match to me."

"Where we're going, there will be much worse foes."

"Where are we going?"

"We're inside a computer game. That means the more dangerous it gets, the closer we are to our goal." A shudder

runs down my spine when I remember my last journey through the Cubeworld. Do I have to endure all of that again? "Most likely we have to go into the Nether first."

"What kind of place is that?"

"The Nether is some kind of underworld. You can only get there by building a portal. I know how to do it."

"A portal into the underworld, searching for a girl ... that's like the legend of Orpheus, who went down into Hades' realm to free his beloved Eurydice!"

"Yes, maybe, I don't know. Come on, let's go. The sooner we get there, the better."

Plato has collected enough food for a journey, but he only knows how to create stone swords and pickaxes. Before we venture deeper down, I show him how to find and melt iron.

When we finally both wear iron armor and carry a sword, he proudly says: "Look at me! I'm like the great Achilles! No enemy can withstand me!"

"I wouldn't be so sure," I reply. After I have created two buckets and filled them with water, we set out on our journey. In order to build a Nether portal, we need obsidian, which is created by cooling lava with water. So we dig down diagonally.

Finding lava takes much longer than I had hoped. After digging down a couple of hundred blocks, we still haven't seen any of it, nor did we encounter any bedrock. The dimensions of this Cubeworld seem to be different from what I am used to. Finally, I stop. If this is an original-size replica of the Earth made of Minecraft blocks, how deep would we have to dig? As far as I remember, Earth has a diameter of twelve thousand kilometers, or eight thousand miles, so the center would be millions of blocks down! How deep would you have to dig to reach lava? Surely not that far, but still probably thousands of blocks down.

"Are you sure that you know what you're looking for, and where to find it?" the philosopher asks, as if guessing my thoughts.

"Yes. We need lava, so we need to dig deeper down. I would have thought we'd found it by now, but this game world is much larger than the one I know."

"That's not what I meant."

"What then?"

"You say you're looking for a girl. How do you know that you'll find her in Hades' realm?"

I can't shrug, so I just answer, "I gave up trying to understand what's wrong with me, so I just take the world as it appears. When I was in the Cubeworld the last time, I didn't even know it wasn't real." I tell him how I wandered around without any memories, how I met Simon, came to the room with the levers, and finally understood that I was in a coma.

"Now I really have no idea what's happening at all. I thought I had finally woken up after riding the Enderdragon, but apparently, that was an illusion as well." Frustrated, I hit a stone block with my pickaxe.

"The Gods have imposed a trial on you, like they did on Heracles, Ulysses, Theseus, Sisyphus, and all the other heroes," Plato says. "Gods love to do that!"

"Screw the Gods!"

"You shouldn't be swearing! They don't like that at all. Only when you humbly accept your task, will they help you with it."

"What the heck am I supposed to do?" I'm glad my rectangular body can't cry - that would be quite embarrassing, in front of the philosopher. "When is this madness going to stop?"

"Don't despair! You obviously have friends among the Gods. They sent you me, as your teacher and companion."

A great teacher and companion he is, with no clue about Minecraft, philosophizing and lecturing all day long! But I don't want to hurt his feelings, so I reply, "And what do you think is my task? There's no room full of riddles down here, not even an enderman to overcome. Only blocks, blocks, and more blocks!"

Plato is silent. Finally, he says, "Understanding!"

"Understanding? What's that supposed to mean?"

"To gain understanding is your task. It all makes sense, don't you see? What you told me about - the room with the levers, your apparent awakening - all this has brought you nearer to understanding the absolute truth. Only when you finally find it will you be free. I have searched for the truth behind the world all my life. It's no coincidence that we've met here, my friend!"

"Hm. Maybe. But this doesn't help us very much now, does it?"

"As my teacher, the great and wise Socrates, once said, the most important understanding is that of one's own ignorance."

"Yes, I've heard that before: I know that I know nothing."

"Exactly. So what are we doing here?"

"We're standing around blathering."

"No, I mean, why did we dig down here? What are we looking for?"

"Lava. We need to build a portal to get into the Nether, where we ..." I hesitate, finally realizing what he's trying to tell me. "You think we're on the wrong track?"

"Yes, I think that's quite possible. As the wise Heraclitus once noted: Ever-newer waters flow on those who step into the same rivers."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"In my academy, we always encourage the students to find the solution to a problem by themselves."

"But we're not in school here!" I flare up, but then I get it. "You mean, it's wrong to try to walk the same path two

times? That we shouldn't go into the Nether and the End again?"

"So it appears you have got a brain after all. But you're wrong: I don't think we shouldn't go there, whatever those places are."

I sense there's more to his words than what's obvious. "But you're not sure. You think we don't know at all where we need to go. So we shouldn't assume anything and question everything. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"I see I've found a teachable student!"

I sigh. Not only am I lost in an imaginary world, I also get permanent private lessons on the way!

"All right. If we're not supposed to dig farther down, what else should we do?"

Plato looks at me with his squinting pixel eyes as if expecting me to find the answer myself.

"What do you know?" he asks.

I'd shrug if I could. "I think, therefore I am?"

"Hmph. If I ever heard circular reasoning, it's this. What else?"

"I need to get out of here!"

"Where is 'here'?"

"I have no idea. We're in my head, I guess."

"And how could we get out of your head?"

"By waking up."

"How, then, would you know you're awake?"

"Hm. That's a good question. I thought I was awake when I was lying in the hospital, when I went to school, when I was in Dr. Johanson's mental clinic. But maybe I was wrong. How can I know if I'm dreaming?"

"Are you dreaming now?"

"Yes."

"How do you know that?"

I point to the blocks around us. "Does this look like reality to you?"

"So you can determine whether you're awake just by looking at your surroundings?"

"No ... I thought I was awake in the nuthouse. Everything looked perfectly real. But then I saw the door into the Minecraft world, and walked right through it. One thing is certain: If I see something impossible, I'm dreaming."

"So we need to find something impossible."

"But everything around here - this passage, you, me - is impossible!"

"Not in this world."

"You mean, I need to find something that can't exist in the Cubeworld, in order to awaken from it?"

"If it's the way out of a dream to realize that you're dreaming, and if the way to that realization is something impossible, it follows that the way out of the dream is to find something that can't be."

"But it doesn't work like that! I already saw impossible things in the supposedly real world - creepers, zombies, the door leading to this place - but I still didn't wake up!"

"Were those things really impossible?"

"Yes!" I shout in frustration. But then I remember something. "Well, I knew they weren't real, but I still thought I was in reality."

"Why?"

Boy, it's tiring to have a discussion with an ancient Greek philosopher! "Because I thought the things I saw were hallucinations. I believed only part of what I experienced wasn't real. But how can I tell the difference?"

"That's the question, isn't it?"

A great help he is! What use is the most famous philosopher of all time if I need to figure out everything myself? Then I remember that Plato doesn't really exist. All his thoughts are my own. Of course I must find a way out of here myself!

It must be possible to solve this riddle with logic. What I need is something that tells me reliably that I'm not in reality. That not only a particular thing isn't real, but everything around me as well. But how could that work? How can I discern whether something is a hallucination or not?

I remember the pine needle. I didn't know whether it was real until I poked Sister Carol with it. To be exact, I still didn't know it then. But I knew that either both the needle and the nurse were real, or neither of them. It proved that Dr. Johanson lied to me.

"If I find something that can't exist, but I can use it to change my environment, like a magic wand, then I know that both that item and everything else aren't real. Then I know for sure that I am not in reality."

"Very good!" Plato exclaims, in the exact tone that Mr. Hawker uses if I give a correct answer in mathematics class.

That's all nice and well, but where do I get such a magic item? As I ask Plato about it, he answers cryptically, "You already answered that question!"

What's that supposed to mean, for crying out loud? I want to shout at him that I need answers, not riddles. Instead, I think about our first dialogue in his dwelling. I told him that we needed to go into the Nether. Is that the answer he's referring to? But we were already on our way

down there when he started this discussion. If he is a part of me, that means that I myself somehow realized I was on the wrong track. This is all very confusing!

I try to remember the exact wording of our discussion. What did I tell him before talking about the Nether? I asked him whether he could fight. He claimed he could deal with any monster; I told him he hadn't seen half of it, and that in a computer game, the closer you are to the solution, the harder it gets.

That's it! The fact that we haven't encountered any foes at all clearly shows that we're wrong. To get to our goal, all we have to do is walk into the direction of the worst monsters!

Hurray!

I listen, but can't hear any *unnghs* or other sounds.

"What's the matter with you, young Marco? Did you lose your speech?"

"What? No. I finally know where we need to go."

"And where is that?"

"Where it hurts."

"I'm not sure I like that conclusion."

"Me neither."

"Then it must be correct."

"You found me down in the abandoned mine shaft, didn't you?"

"You mean the tunnels where those ugly servants of Arachne strike terror in any traveler's heart?"

"If you're talking about big blue spiders, yes. Lead me there!"

"And you're sure that's the way we're supposed to go?"

"No. But I don't have a better idea."

"Very good! So follow me then!"

We hop up the endless staircase that we just dug. Finally, we're back in the cave where Plato lived.

When I see his small patch of grain, I ask, "Have you ever been to the Overworld?"

"How could I? Nobody can leave the realm of the dead. Every child knows that!"

"If you haven't been up there, where did you get the grain and the wood for your house?"

"All this was already here when my soul took form in this world. The Gods have prepared my afterlife splendidly!"

Maybe we should try to dig up, toward the surface. But I'm not even sure there is an Overworld in this hallucination. Additionally, I'm afraid to go back down into the mine, and that feeling tells me it is probably the right way.

Plato leads us to the far end of the cave, into an irregular tunnel which, according to him, has always been here. Soon, it exits into an abyss of enormous size. In the computer game, those chasms are impressive, but this one exceeds anything I have ever seen in Minecraft by far. It is at least one hundred blocks wide. Deep down, a reddish glow reflects off the giant rock wall on the far side. To the left, a staircase leads down, obviously hewn out of the rock. Plato says he wasn't the one who built it.

We follow the stairs and soon reach an entrance to the abandoned mine shaft, which opens onto the chasm. A wooden structure with remains of railroad tracks on top protrudes into the chasm. On the far side, there's a similar structure, indicating that a bridge once spanned the chasm, but most of it is gone.

Do we have to cross the chasm here? The thought makes me queasy, which translates to "yes." As if to confirm my suspicion, a creeper suddenly appears in an opening on the far side.

"We need to cross this abyss," I state.

"How do you know that?" quizzes the principal of Plato's Private School of Useless Philosophy.

"All right, I know I don't know how I know we need to cross the chasm, but we'll do it anyway, okay? Simply because it's difficult."

"As you wish. This is your journey."

Before I can answer, several hisses announce the inhabitants of the tunnel. Sighing, I draw my iron sword. I'd prefer diamond, but when I look at the size of the chasm, I

don't even want to imagine how deep we would have to dig to find it.

At least, Plato proves his claim that he can fight. "I wonder where all this vermin come from," he comments as he finishes off a cave spider. "So many large animals can't really find enough food down here, can they?"

"They spawn anew all the time," I explain.

"They do what?"

I try to describe a monster spawner to him.

"Then we need to destroy this spawning device," he suggests.

"That's not so easy, and it isn't really worth the effort. Let's cut some stone blocks from the wall and build a bridge across the chasm instead."

As if the spiders sense that we're about to leave their realm, depriving them of prey, they attack us with renewed vigor from two sides at once. No sooner have I killed one of the beasts than the next one crawls at me along the ceiling. When we finally have killed all the monsters of this wave, my life force has dropped to a critical level. To be safe, I quickly close the tunnel with stone blocks, preventing further attacks before we have regained our strength.

I collect two full stacks of stone blocks and step on the remains of the wooden bridge. At the edge, I cautiously bend over. The abyss causes a strong feeling of vertigo. As I start to fall, I barely attach a stone block to the wooden one I stand on, preventing me from tumbling down into the reddish glow deep below.

In this way, we extend the bridge bit by bit. But the chasm is even wider than I thought. When I have used up all the 128 stone blocks in my mind, there's still a gulf of empty space fifty blocks wide between us and the far end of

the bridge. Luckily, Plato has collected almost as many stone blocks as I had. On my suggestion, he gives them to me (it looks like he's disgorging them - yuck!), so I can finish my work.

Finally, we close the gap and reach the remnants of the bridge on the other side, which is about twenty blocks long. At the end, there's another abandoned mine shaft, which means even more spiders.

Concerned, I look at my sword, which is heavily used. My armor has suffered some dents as well, in a metaphorical sense, of course, since dents aren't possible in the Cubeworld. We need to create new weapons and armor before we can enter more dangerous areas. But this shouldn't be a problem - I can see several patches of iron ore shimmering in the rock wall.

While I try to figure out which of the ore veins is the easiest to reach, I sense a movement in the tunnel ahead of us. A colossal monster trudges toward us. It is made of gray speckled cubes covered with something like vines. With its ungainly movements, it reminds me of a crude robot from an ancient science fiction movie. An iron golem!

Usually, these mobs can be found in villages, defending the inhabitants against zombies and other foes. Once you see how they use their long arms to toss skeletons, zombies, spiders, and even endermen through the air, you feel a lot of respect for these guys. Normally, they are neutral toward players, as long as one doesn't attack the villagers. So it seems likely the golem won't hurt us. On the other hand, I have learned the hard way that nothing in this Cubeworld can be taken for granted.

The golem stops at the tunnel entrance and stares at us. At least, he doesn't attack us on sight. But he is so broad that he blocks the way.

What now? We could try to kill it, but we'd probably come off second best. Golems are really tough, and a single hit with his long arms would kick us right into the abyss. So it's better to use intelligence instead of brute force.

I build a small path, leading from the bridge to the right, then cutting to the left, so that it runs parallel to the original bridge. The golem watches me with his unmoving gaze, but remains still.

When I reach the rock wall, I dig a tunnel into it with the pickaxe. After a few blocks, I run into an iron ore vein by lucky coincidence, so I stop to craft new swords for Plato and me.

I extend the tunnel another few blocks, then turn left, so I should reach the mine shaft behind the golem, which must still be guarding the entrance. When I remove the next block in front of me, torchlight is cast into the tunnel. But in the next instant, a shadow blocks the light, and dark red eyes stare at me.

This can't be! How did the Golem know that we'd emerge here? Can he sense us through the wall? Or did he guess my plan? Golems normally aren't very smart, but what's normal in this world?

Maybe he can even understand what I say? "Move aside, golem!" I command.

The mob just regards me, motionless.

"Can I be of any help?" Plato asks. Is that sarcasm I hear in his voice?

"If you have an idea how we can get around this monster, I'd be happy to hear it. This guy seems to have objections against us entering the mine shaft."

"Which leads you to the conclusion that this is exactly what we need to do."

"Correct. Puzzles and quests are there to be solved, aren't they?"

"Who knows what purpose the puzzles of life serve? Wouldn't they all be solved if we knew?"

"So do you have an idea or not?"

"Do you know the fable of the starving donkey?"

"No."

"It goes like this: A donkey once wandered across a field, where he saw two fig trees, both carrying ripe fruit. Since the donkey loved figs more than anything, his mouth watered. So he ran toward the trees, until he was right in the middle between them. But since both trees had the same size and the same amount of fruit to offer, he couldn't decide which tree to pick from first. When he looked longingly to the left tree, he immediately felt that the one on his right carried even more gorgeous fruits. But if he looked there, he lost sight of the other one, and imagined its fruits to be even bigger and juicier. So he turned his head back and forth without ever moving closer to one of the trees, until he starved to death."

"So what are you trying to tell me with this story? That I'm a stupid donkey, unable to decide what to do next?"

"I wouldn't dare to slander in such a way!"

"That's good to hear!"

"I was talking about slandering the donkey. They are proud animals."

"How nice of you!"

"Yes."

While the golem is staring at me distrustingly, I try to gulp down my anger toward the unbearable smarty-pants who calls himself my teacher. It irritates me most to know that this know-it-all is somehow a part of me! I wish Simon were here - he probably would have known what to do. At least, he wouldn't tell me stories about donkeys. Instead, he'd give me a hint how to get rid of that stupid golem. He'd explain to me how to build a golem trap, or how to lead him astray, or ... what an idiot I am!

"You were right. I really am a stupid donkey!"

"As I said before, they are proud animals. They are not stupid, only greedy and a little stubborn sometimes. Just like some of my students."

"Well, you gave me an idea. Listen ..."

While I explain my plan, Plato looks at me skeptically, but doesn't object. We go back a few steps into the tunnel, watched by the golem. Then we each start digging side tunnels, mine back toward the chasm, Plato's in the opposite direction. After ten blocks, I change the direction toward the mine shaft, hoping that Plato is doing the same.

It works: Just as I remove the last block before me, the philosopher does the same, twenty-one blocks away. The golem stands right in the middle between us, looking back and forth, but not moving.

But what now? The golem is trapped, but we can't move either without unfreezing him. If one of us makes a step toward or away from him, he'll immediately move to the one nearer to him, probably attacking. Apparently, my plan wasn't thought out so well.

"Do you have another fable for me?" I shout at Plato.

"Would you like to hear the one about the student who couldn't think by himself, or about the teacher who, out of despair, walled himself in, so he couldn't be asked another question for the rest of his life?"

"Thanks for the big help!" I shout back. But then I hesitate. "What was that about the teacher?"

Instead of answering, Plato begins to erect a wall in front of him. As he places the last of nine stone blocks, closing the mine shaft, the golem suddenly moves toward me. Quickly, I close my end of the shaft, then walk down the side tunnel to Plato.

"I begin to understand how a teacher feels who has slow-witted students," I say, embarrassed.

"I doubt it," Plato answers.

We continue our way through the abandoned mine shaft until we reach a crossroads. There are cobwebs everywhere, but no hissing to be heard. Since we don't have any reason to change our direction, we move on straight ahead. Whenever we encounter crossroads or branches, we try to continue roughly in the same direction. Soon, it becomes clear that this mine shaft is much larger than anything in the game as well.

"Where are the spiders?" Plato asks after a while.

"I don't know. There seem to be no monsters around. Maybe that means we're wrong."

"How do you feel?"

"Uneasy. As if something is amiss. Like ... the calm before the storm."

"Then we should continue for a while. We can always turn around later."

So we go on. At the next crossroads, we continue straight ahead, but after a turn, the tunnel reaches a dead end. Just as I'm about to turn back, I see something glittering in the tunnel wall. A diamond vein!

Immediately, I begin to hack at the diamond ore with my pickaxe.

"Don't you think we've got better things to do than dig for treasure?" Plato asks when I finally destroy the block and a diamond the size of a tennis ball materializes in my head.

"Diamonds are quite useful," I explain, pointing at a second diamond ore block that appeared behind the first one. "You can use them to craft swords and armor, which are much better than those made of iron."

"Then I will help you."

We discover even more diamonds after we remove the second block. In the computer game, I rarely found more than three blocks of diamond ore in the same place, but this vein seems to be huge. Apparently, everything in this version of the Cubeworld is much larger than I'm used to.

After a while, I begin to feel uneasy. The vein seems to have no end. We already dug a deep tunnel into it, collecting more than enough diamonds to craft swords and armor for both of us, but still diamond ore shimmers everywhere around us.

"I don't like this," Plato says, confirming my own concerns. "The Gods don't give gifts without a reason."

"Then we better make good use of it." I craft diamond swords, armor, and pickaxes.

"If we're going to die, at least we look like heroes!" Plato exclaims.

We go back to the crossroads, randomly turning right. The cobwebs grow thicker in this direction, but still there are no monsters to be seen or heard, eight-legged or not.

This tunnel leads to another dead end, the walls covered by even more cobwebs. I start cutting through them with my sword.

"What are you doing?" Plato asks. "Do you think you need to clean up these tunnels, like Heracles cleaned the Augean Stables?"

"Just a hunch."

The cobwebs are tough. Only after I have removed them almost completely do I remember that it would have been much easier with a pair of scissors, or a bucket of water. But my efforts are rewarded: In the floor under the

cobwebs there's a hole in the ground, with a ladder inside it.

"We need to go down there, I guess," Plato notes.

"Looks like it."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Why aren't you climbing down?"

"I ... well ..."

"You're afraid, aren't you, young hero?"

"Yes."

The fact that we walked through this gigantic mine shaft without encountering a single monster makes me afraid indeed. Whatever waits down there must be much worse than a bunch of cave spiders. But even more frightening than that knowledge is the memory of the hole in the Nether, and of what happened after I plunged into it. I know I need to go down there, but I'm unable to move.

"Do you think the great Heracles, who strangled two snakes as an infant, was afraid?"

"I'm not a Greek hero, get it?"

Plato regards me with squinting pixel eyes. "He was the strongest man who ever lived, but believe me, even he knew fear! Being a hero doesn't mean you're never afraid. It means you conquer your anxiety!"

"But I'm not Heracles," I moan. "I can't go down there! I just can't!"

"What are we searching for?" my teacher asks.

I'm not sure anymore. "An exit from this world, I guess."

"What was the name of the virgin you told me about?"

"Amely?"

"Wasn't it because of her that you took all those dangers and hardships upon yourself?"

"I don't know. Maybe I just imagined talking to her. Dr. Johanson probably told me the truth: I had a car accident and fell into a coma. My mother is dead, and Amely doesn't even know I exist. So why should I try to get out of this world at all?"

Plato's eyes gleam. A shadow seems to fall over his face. "In the name of the Gods!" he shouts. "Can it be that I wasted my time with a dumb kid? What happened to humankind, if a strong young man is afraid of a hole in the ground, like a pathetic coward?"

"Didn't you just tell me that even Heracles was afraid?"

"Yes, he was. But he possessed something he could use to overcome his fear, something you seem to lack: courage!"

I'm fed up! "What do you know of courage, you Greek bigmouth? Apart from a few know-it-all phrases and silly fables, you've got nothing to show! You claim to be wise, but you don't even know how to craft a diamond sword!"

"I take it you don't need my help anymore," Plato replies. "May the Gods be with you, while you're lying in your cozy bed, dreaming of great adventures!" With that, he turns and trudges back down the tunnel.

"Yes, leave me alone!" I shout after him. "I can do quite well without your so-called wisdom!"

Only when Plato is out of sight do I realize the silence around me. The weight of thousands of stone blocks seems to press down on me. No doubt the philosopher was a nuisance, but at least I wasn't alone.

Disheartened, I stare at the hole. If only I knew that Amely really waits for me somewhere! For her, I'd take on any danger. When I wandered through the Cubeworld for the first time, I thought I heard her voice, calling me. It was

like a beacon in the distance, encouraging me, driving me onward.

The more I think about it, the more I doubt my memories of talking to her. Honestly, why should a girl like Amely be interested in someone like me? Why should she trust me enough to tell me what her stepfather did to her? Doesn't this sound a little too much like the fantasy of a teenager who fell in love with a girl he can never have?

I listen intently, hoping against hope to hear the faint echo of her voice from somewhere. But there's only a soft hissing behind me.

Startled, I turn around. A creeper has sneaked up on me from behind, already swelling, about to explode. I jump backward and plunge into the hole. A fraction of a second later, there's a tremendous explosion. I feel a light shock, but the damage is mostly deflected by my diamond armor. The funnel-shaped opening of the crater the creeper created diminishes quickly as I sink down into darkness. The rungs of the ladder glide past me. I could grab them and climb up again, but I know that Plato was right: That would be cowardly.

The shaft ends at a tunnel covered with cobwebs. After a few blocks, it opens into a large cave, lit by an orange glow.

I take all my courage, draw my diamond sword, and walk to the cave entrance. But the moment I discover what's waiting for me in there, I freeze in horror.

The cave is at least a hundred blocks across and half that in height. On the far side, there's a giant stone face sculpted out of the rock. It reminds me of the portraits of Amely I encountered on my first journey, but this one is creepy. The eyes glow orange. Tears of lava run down the

cheeks into a pool below her chin. The mouth is open, as if crying in pain.

In the middle of the cave sits a monster that dwarves anything I ever saw in Minecraft. It's a giant cave spider, its body the size of a school bus, each of its eight legs at least ten blocks long. Unlike the normal Minecraft spiders, its limbs have joints, so it resembles a real spider much more closely. Instead of shining red, its eight eyes are glowing purple, like those of an enderman.

"Um, hello!" I say. You never know how far a little friendliness can carry you.

The spider doesn't react. It just sits there, staring at me, waiting.

It's obvious that I have to cross the cave and reach the mouth of the stone face on the other side. I hack at the walls and floor, trying to create a tunnel, but the cave is made of indestructible bedrock. Building a bridge won't help either, because spiders can jump and climb walls.

If only Plato was here! I now regret that I drove him away. Even if he was a nuisance, at least I wouldn't have to deal with this monstrosity all by myself.

Longingly, I look back at the ladder. I could just climb up again and look for another way. If I do it right, I could ...

Who am I kidding? My own disturbed subconscious has set up this trial for me. It knows all too well what I'm afraid of. There's no way around it - you can't deceive yourself, after all.

So I take a deep breath, raise my sword high into the air, and step boldly into the cave. "You are not real!" I shout, feeling like Gandalf in the Mines of Moria when he faced the Balrog. "YOU - ARE - NOT - REAL!"

The second I enter the cave, the spider moves toward me at frightening speed. If I weren't stuck in this rigid body, I'd shake in fear.

I barely have the time to stammer a weak "You are ... not real?" before the monster reaches me. Its two foremost legs grab and lift me toward the giant head, so quickly that I don't even land a single stroke of my sword. Each of the eight eyes is the size of a Minecraft block. Their hypnotic glow drives all my thoughts from my brain. I'm not even afraid anymore. There's only the calm realization that I failed.

Below the eyes, there are two cubes from which pincer-like mandibles protrude. They are dotted with green pixels, probably symbolizing poison. As they open and close rhythmically, they make a terrifying noise: *clackclackclackclack* ...

Gathering all my concentration, I tear my gaze away from the spider's eyes and look at the lava-crying face. *I'm sorry, Amely!*

The spider brings me closer to its mandibles. I wait for the kiss of death. Instead, suddenly threads shoot out of an opening below its mouth. I'm turned around so rapidly that I feel sick, while the monster spins a cocoon around me.

Still holding me in its forelegs, the spider crawls to a corner of the cave where a few dozen cocooned victims are lined up like mummies. Under the cobwebs, I recognize the motionless shapes of skeletons, zombies, and even a creeper. As the spider puts me down next to it, the creeper starts to hiss softly, but apparently the spider's threads are so strong that it can't even explode. After a moment, the hissing subsides.

The spider scurries back into the center of the cave, sitting there and staring at the entrance, waiting for the next fool stupid enough to enter the cave.

I try to move, but it's useless. Only now do I remember that I carry two buckets of water in my inventory. Water is an excellent means to wash away cobwebs. But as much as I try, I can't materialize the bucket. Completely helpless, I'm at the mercy of the monster, which apparently has lost any interest in me.

I remember another scene from *The Lord of the Rings*: Frodo, poisoned by the giant spider Shelob, is carried into a fortress by orcs. His buddy Samwise Gamgee follows the orcs, drives them away with a ruse, and rescues his friend. But I managed to anger the only friend I had in this world. So I can do nothing but wait until the spider finally gets hungry and puts me out of my misery.

"This didn't work out so nicely, did it?" I say to the creeper next to me.

The monster hisses in agreement.

"By the Gods! What awful curse has created such a freak of nature?"

I start from the semiconscious state I fell into a while ago. A lonely figure with a white beard, clad in diamond armor, stands in the cave entrance, looking ridiculously small in comparison to the spider. Plato came back to rescue me! I feel deep gratitude, but no relief. It's impossible for him to defeat the monster.

Motionless, the spider sits there, waiting for the philosopher to step into its realm.

"Stay where you are!" I shout as loudly as I can. "The monster is extremely quick. As soon as you enter the cave, it grabs you and spins you into a cocoon!"

The spider turns its head toward me, as if to scold me for spoiling the fun.

"Hold out, my friend!" Plato shouts back. "I'll come to the rescue!"

"Forget it! You don't stand a chance!"

Instead of an answer, I hear a buzzing sound, then a loud, angry hiss. Plato has shot an arrow into one of the eight eyes.

The spider jumps to the entrance, but it is much too narrow for it.

"Yes, come closer, you ugly bastard of Arachne and Polyphemos!" Another arrow buzzes through the air. The spider hisses again, crawling back to the center of the cave. I feel like a total idiot for not thinking of this myself.

Three more arrows find their marks. The glow of the eyes that were hit expires. The spider rubs its forelegs over its face, trying in vain to pull out the arrows. Tirelessly,

Plato draws his bow, and two more eyes go blind. Only one is left now. But the monster finally realizes that it has to change its tactics. It turns around, showing its large backside to Plato. He shoots a few more arrows at it, but for the giant monster they are no more than mosquito stings.

For a while, there's a stalemate: Plato standing at the entrance, the spider sitting motionlessly in the middle of its lair. Then the philosopher cautiously slips into the cave.

My heart is in my mouth as I watch him sneak toward me along the wall. The spider seems not to notice. But when Plato has crossed half the distance to me, it suddenly turns around and crawls rapidly toward him.

The philosopher reacts quickly, sending another arrow home. The now completely blind spider makes a noise like a car being crushed in a scrap-metal press. Its long legs grope around for Plato, but he's avoiding them skilfully, zigzagging through the cave.

The head of the spider moves left and right, its limbs jerking. It looks like it is performing a strange dance. If the monster gets Plato, he's a goner. It surely won't stop at spinning him into a cocoon.

"I'm over here, you hideous monstrosity!" the old Greek shouts from the edge of the lava lake.

Immediately, the spider turns toward him. Plato doesn't move.

"Yes, come nearer, if you dare!"

The spider hesitates. It sits just a few blocks away from Plato, as if sensing a trap. Its legs grope in front of it, missing its prey only by inches.

"Come on! I haven't got all of eternity!" the philosopher says.

This provocation is too much for the spider to ignore. It crouches down, then jumps.

Plato throws himself down at exactly the right moment. The spider flies over him, right into the lava. Immediately, its giant body catches fire. It jerks its legs, but can't get out of the lava lake. It emits a final shriek of death, then stops moving.

My savior runs toward me. I want to hug him, but I'm still trapped in the cocoon. Since I'm unable to express my feelings of gratitude, I simply say "Thank you."

"Never mind. I'd always wanted to be a real hero, like Ulysses, who once blinded the cyclops Polyphemus with a glowing stake. From this fable I got my idea, by the way."

He cuts my cocoon with his sword, sawing through the tough cobwebs.

"You are a real hero!" I reply. "I'm sorry I called you a bigmouth!"

"And I shouldn't have called you a coward. What you told me about your previous journey shows that you're the bigger hero of us. And I can learn a lot about this world from you."

"I'll try ..." I begin, but then I glance at the stone face. "Oh no!"

"What's wrong? Did I cut you?"

"No. Look behind you!"

Plato turns around and freezes. Cave spiders silently pour out of the stone mouth. At least two dozen of them are already crawling over the face and the cave walls toward us, their numbers still growing.

"By Hera! Is there no end to this? What did you do to the Gods to make them so angry at you?"

I'd like to know that as well. Plato has defeated the giant spider with his cleverness, but against this spider army, even his brains won't help much.

"What are we going to do now?" I ask.

"Die, I guess," he answers dryly.

Meanwhile, my arms are free, so I can remove the last remaining cobwebs myself. Plato waves his sword through the air.

"Come, come, let me hack you to pieces!" he shouts, but it's obvious that his haughty tone is false.

There must be more than fifty spiders by now. They cover the ground, the walls, the ceiling of the cave like a single swarming mass. I draw my sword and take a step toward Plato, but my foot is still caught by a cobweb of a cocoon next to me, in which a zombie is trapped. Plato's armor is full of sticky threads as well.

I remember the water buckets. I could use one to tidy up our armor, so that we at least die in a clean outfit. The thought gives me an idea. It's a big risk, but confronted with the overwhelming superiority of the spider army, we haven't got much to lose, have we?

The first spider reaches us. With a hiss, it jumps at Plato, who can barely block the attack with his sword. This seems to be a signal for all the others, which now increase their speed, rushing toward us from all sides.

Instead of my sword, I materialize a water bucket and pour its contents over the cocoons to the left of me. The cobwebs dissolve immediately, and dozens of skeletons, zombies, and creepers wake up from their immobile state. I repeat this on the right side with the second bucket.

"Are you out of your mind?" Plato shouts. "Aren't the spiders enough enemies already?"

The creeper next to me begins to hiss, as if confirming Plato. But it scuttles past us on its short legs. Only when it is a few blocks away does it explode, dragging at least eight spiders to death with it.

Now, the skeletons and zombies enter the fight. Not one of them attacks us. Instead, they lunge at the spiders as if they have a score to settle with them. Soon, the whole cave is filled with the raging battle. The moaning of the zombies, the clicking of the skeletons, and the hissing of the spiders mix into a wild cacophony that sounds like a giant, out-of-control steam engine.

The undead draw a large part of the spider army upon them, but that doesn't mean Plato and I remain unmolested. I have to fend off the attacks of three spiders at once, which pounce at me from different sides. Plato, fighting back to back with me, swears quietly, indicating that he's not much better off.

I can deflect most of the attacks, but one of the monsters manages to bite me. I feel sick, and the ground begins to sway below me. My sight gets blurred, so I can't see my opponents anymore. Instead of attacking them in a focused way, I just poke around with my sword.

Through a haze, I realize that a spider at the wall next to me is preparing to jump. I try to turn toward it to block the attack, but my sword arm suddenly seems to weigh a ton, so I can't raise it in time. An arrow hisses past close to my head, hitting the spider, which is thrown backward. As the monster crawls at me again, I finish it off with a sword stroke. I owe my life to a skeleton, of all things!

Finally, the noise of the battle dies down. Or maybe it's my failing senses realizing less and less of what's going on around me. Barely able to stand upright, I'm incapable of

doing anything to defend myself. But amazingly, I am not attacked again.

"Victory is ours!" Plato cheers.

Slowly, the fog in my head rises. The effect of the spider's venom doesn't seem to last very long. I'm still weak, but at least I can see again. The cave floor is covered with spider silk, bones, shreds of rotten meat, bows, swords, and pieces of armor. Only three skeletons and four zombies are left. They stand together in a group, staring at us.

"Unngh!" one of the zombies says.

"Unngh!" I reply, hoping that it means something like "thank you."

One of the skeletons raises its bow at me, pulling back the string. But the zombie that moaned stretches out its arm, touching the skeleton, which lowers its bow.

"We thank you for your help, denizens of Hades," Plato says, bowing deeply. I mirror him.

"Unngh!" the zombie says. The undead turn around and shuffle toward the exit from which Plato and I came.

"What a battle!" the philosopher exclaims. "We'll be in the legends! The tale of Plato and Marco in the underworld will be known by every child for centuries to come!"

"We must get out of here in one piece first, so we can tell our story."

"That's true, young hero," Plato admits.

"Didn't you say we needed to find something impossible in this world, so I could wake up from my dream?" I ask.

"I said: If it's the way out of a dream to realize that you're dreaming, and if the way to that realization is something impossible, it follows that the way out of the dream is to find something that can't be."

"But we just fought something impossible. There is no giant spider in Minecraft. And the undead helped us in battle, which would never happen in the computer game."

"If we fought the spider, and if the undead helped us, then it wasn't impossible."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Plato doesn't answer.

Sighing, I point at the open mouth of the stone face. "Whatever, I think we need to go through there."

"Looks like it," Plato agrees.

The dead body of the giant spider half protrudes from the lava lake, forming a kind of island. With a courageous leap, we land on it. Suddenly the body below us shakes. For an awful moment, I fear that the monster is not yet dead, but apparently it was just some kind of reflex.

One of the forelegs rests on the edge of the lava right below the mouth of the giant face, forming a narrow bridge. Carefully balancing along it, we reach the opening of the mouth. A dark passage leads inside. As I attach a torch to the wall, I see that it is covered with cobwebs end to end. I don't have any water left, so we hack our way through them.

After ten blocks we reach a small, square room with a cobweb-covered cage of black metal. Inside it, a little blue-black spider spins around rapidly, engulfed by flames. We were lucky that this monster spawner apparently had to take a break after producing so many spiders at once, or we'd still be fighting them. Quickly, I place torches around the cage to prevent the appearance of more monsters.

At the end of the room, a staircase leads down. It is free of cobwebs, but somehow that doesn't feel reassuring to me at all.

The stairs lead straight ahead for ten steps, then turn right. After another dozen blocks, they turn right another time, then back to the left. We cross a level section of tunnel only three blocks long before the stairs start to lead upward again. In this way, the passage continues: Without any apparent reason, the stairs wind up and down, sometimes straight, then in narrow spirals. The walls and steps are made of bedrock that won't budge when I hit it in frustration. So all we can do is follow the passage.

After what feels like an hour, I stop. "Do you think we're going the right way?" I ask my companion.

"How should I know?" he replies, irritated. "You're the one who's searching for the exit from this world."

"And you're the one who knows everything!"

"Is this starting all over again? Would you prefer to continue on your own, facing whatever lies at the end of this staircase without my help?"

"No, of course not. I'm sorry. But this is frustrating! We defeat a giant spider, and instead of waking up in reality, or at least finding a room full of treasure, we wander around this corkscrew stairs designed by a lunatic!"

"We defeated the giant spider?"

"All right, all right, you did. Aren't you the greatest of heroes!"

"I should say so!"

"If you're so fantastic, do you have an idea where this staircase leads to?"

"Your tone is not appropriate, boy! A student should be respectful toward his teacher!"

"A great teacher you are! Instead of teaching me anything, you let me find everything out myself!"

"That's the only way to learn."

"*Hrmph!* It's no use talking to you."

We continue our way up and down the stairs in silence. Our supply of torches has long since been used up, so as soon as we attach a torch to the wall, we have to go back and get the last one to use for the next stretch of tunnel, which doubles the distance we have to travel. In this way, we move in a small area of light through absolute darkness. In theory, there should be monsters spawning before and behind us, but we encounter none.

The hopelessness of what I'm doing sinks into my mind. Each step, each decision seems to lead me deeper into this dream, instead of back to reality. No doubt whatever lies at the end of this idiotic staircase will be a strange hallucination as well.

I'm so deeply lost in my gloomy thoughts that I almost step on the pressure plate before me, which is difficult to see in the dim light. Startled, I stop, mounting a torch at the wall. It lights up a room before us, ten blocks wide and three deep, with walls three blocks high. At the far side, there's a closed metal door with a sign mounted above it, showing no inscription. Almost all of the floor is covered with pressure plates.

"Careful!" I warn Plato. "These are likely triggers for traps!"

"Uh-huh," the philosopher says.

I count the plates. In the row at the far end of the room, all ten squares have a plate. In the middle row, the ground square to the farthest right is absent a plate. The front row has only eight plates: In the left corner there's a blank

square, then seven plates, another blank, and finally one plate in the right corner.

It is impossible to jump on one of the blank blocks from where we stand. Even if we could, we'd be farther away from the door than we are now.

If this is a puzzle, some of the plates must be harmless, while others trigger traps. Or we need to step on them in the correct order. But which order? There seem to be no clues here.

"Do you have an idea what this might mean?" I ask Plato.

"It seems to be a riddle."

"Really? I'd never have thought of that on my own!"

"If you're not interested in my opinion, don't ask!"

"Most of all, I'm interested to know whether you have any idea of how to solve this riddle."

"If these plates are triggers for traps, then whoever placed them here apparently doesn't want us to reach the door on the far side. But why, then, is there a door at all?"

"Because there must be a secure way through this room, only known to the one who built it."

"Exactly."

I wait for a while, but no explanation follows.

"And?" I finally ask.

"And what?" Plato asks back.

"'And' in the sense of 'and what do you want to tell me'?"

"In this case, we need to find out which path through the room is safe."

"That's obvious!"

"Yes, therefore I didn't mention it."

Sometimes, Plato is quite difficult to talk to. "Probably, you also didn't mention *how* to find the safe path?"

He sighs, as if he's tired of dealing with a thick-headed student. "If we don't have any information about the right path, there's only one way."

Before I can stop him, he steps on the plate before us.

He neither explodes, nor is hit by a poisoned arrow. There are no sand blocks falling down on him, and no trap door opening up under him. Instead, there's just a faint clicking noise.

"It seems this plate is safe," Plato observes.

"The first one must be," I reply, "or the safe path could only be reached with a leap, and that would be too inconvenient for whoever built this. But now it's getting dangerous: You can go left, right, or straight ahead, and probably only one direction is safe, while the other two lead to death."

"While playing dice games, I have taken greater risks," Plato says, stepping on the plate to the right. Again, there's a soft click.

"Stop this!" I shout. "If this is a puzzle, we need to solve it with logic!"

"That's what I'm doing!" he replies, stepping on the plate before him, in the middle row. I cringe, but instead of an explosion, again there's only a clicking noise. The philosopher seems to have more luck than brains, which is saying something, given that he's supposedly the greatest thinker of ancient times.

Plato takes another step forward. He now stands in front of the door, knocking on it without any effect.

"The door is locked," he states. "There is no apparent opening mechanism."

"Of course not. To open it, we need to step on the plates in the correct order."

"What leads you to that conclusion?"

"The sign above the door has changed," I say, glad that I finally realize something that he missed. "There are letters on it now. Each time you step on a plate, another one appears."

"Correct. The first three were *V*, *B*, and *H*. What is the fourth letter that appeared after I stepped on this last plate? I can't see it from here."

"Y," I answer, disappointed. So that's how he knew that the plates are harmless: He saw the letter appearing when he stepped on the first one, and immediately grasped the logic of this place.

I step on the plate before me and then walk to the right until I reach the block without a plate near the corner. The sign now reads "VBHYVBNM."

There are twenty-seven plates in total. The alphabet has twenty-six letters. So there is one plate that's not a letter, most likely the one next to me in the right corner, which is separated from the others by one empty block. But what purpose does it serve?

Following Plato's example, I simply step on it. A disharmonic sound like an out-of-tune foghorn emits from the door, making me cringe. There's a new text on the sign: "WRONG PASSWORD." So the plate in the corner is the ENTER key.

We try out all plates to find out which letter is where. Soon, it becomes obvious that the layout equals a normal computer keyboard, without all the function keys:

QWERTYUIOP
ASDFGHJKL
ZXCVBNM

Now we know how to enter a word. There's only a small detail missing: What is the correct password?

"Let's try 'Amely,'" I suggest.

It's not easy to hit the letters in the correct order. First, we position ourselves on two empty blocks: Plato in the left corner, next to the A, I on the right beside the ENTER key. Stepping on it, I clear the mixture of letters on the sign, which is underscored by an angry hoot.

Plato steps on the plate in front of him, I on the one to my left. Now he jumps diagonally to the E. I step on the L, and with a big leap Plato manages to jump over the R and T onto the Y. Finally, I hit the ENTER plate.

A hoot, and the sign reads, "WRONG PASSWORD."

On the Internet, a password entry field is often blocked after a few wrong attempts. We don't know how many tries we have, and what happens if they are used up. So we need to carefully consider which words to try.

If I assume that this world only exists in my head, I must know the solution - that much is obvious ... Of course! What's more logical than using the same password that I've chosen for my laptop?

"I am a genius!" I shout.

"You're joking, right?"

"No. That's the password I use to protect my own computer," I say, a little peeved. It was supposed to be ironic when I chose it, but it may sound a little boastful in these circumstances.

"If you think so," Plato comments. His face remains expressionless as always, but I still have the feeling that he's hiding a smirk.

This chain of letters requires us to do some acrobatic leaps, but finally we manage to press all plates in the correct order, until the sign reads "IAMAGENIUS." But as I step on the plate in the right corner, there's only the ugly noise.

"I would have been surprised if this had worked," Plato comments dryly.

"Do you have a better idea?"

He remains silent.

"Let's simply try the word 'password,'" I suggest.

"If you think so."

But "PASSWORD" doesn't open the door. Neither does "WRONGPASSWORD" (that was Plato's idea) or "ABCDEFGH" (mine). At least, our failed attempts have no worse consequences than an ugly noise.

"We're getting nowhere," I observe. "Apparently, this password is not one I know."

"Then we might never find out."

"But there must be a solution!" I claim. "Puzzle rooms always have one. We only need to approach the problem in a logical way."

"All right," Plato agrees. "What are we looking for?"

"An exit?"

We try "EXIT," with no result.

"Reality!" I exclaim. But "REALITY" doesn't open the door either.

"By the Gods!" Plato rants. "This is impossible!"

I look at him, perplexed. "That's it!"

"What?"

"You said we need to find something impossible to get out of here. Maybe that's exactly what we need to enter!"

Plato makes a skeptical noise, but we give it a try. Hopping on the plates like two fleas dancing a waltz, we manage to type "IMPOSSIBLE." I step on the ENTER key, expecting a hoot, but instead a bell-like melody sounds. The sign now reads "PASSWORD ACCEPTED." The door below it opens silently.

21.

The room behind the door is square. The ceiling seems to be made of the same blue glowstone which illuminated the hall of the Wither. In the opposite wall, there is a closed iron door.

In the middle of the room stands a statue. It looks like me, or actually more like my Cubeworld self, only made of light gray stone. Unbelieving, I stare at the amulet that's hanging around its neck. Two entwined snakes, one silver, the other gold, are forming a complicated knot. Each snake holds the other's tail in its mouth. In sharp contrast to all other objects in the Cubeworld, this amulet is not pixelated. The snakes' bodies form perfect curves; even the tiny scales, engraved into the metal, are visible.

I know this amulet, but it definitely doesn't belong here. It comes from a totally different story.

"This just can't be true!" I shout. "The AURYN!"

"The what?" Plato asks.

"The amulet of the Childlike Empress!"

"I never heard of a child empress."

"It's from *The Neverending Story*, one of my favorite books. I read it in the mental hospital. Maybe ... I fell asleep while reading it, and all of this is just a crazy dream!"

"Then it must be a boring story."

"Not at all! It's about a boy reading a book, not knowing that he's part of the story."

"And this amulet appears in it?"

"Yes. It gives the one wearing it unlimited power. He can do whatever he wants."

Plato regards the amulet silently. "Unlimited power ..." he murmurs. "That sounds very dangerous."

"What do you mean?"

"People were never good at dealing with great power. I once knew a bright and pleasant boy named Dionysius. He was my student. When his father, the ruler of Syracuse, died, he ascended to the throne. I had set great hopes on him, but he disappointed me. The power of his reign changed him. All his good qualities diminished, while the bad ones emerged like the veins in his neck when he had one of his tantrums. Despite all my teachings, he was no better than the vengeful drunkard he followed on the throne. Power spoils the character, young Marco, you can believe me that. Only the Gods can wield unlimited power without taking damage, and even in their case I'm not really sure, given how rampant they sometimes behave."

I look at the amulet thoughtfully. "I don't want unlimited power. I just want to go back to reality. And you told me we need to find something impossible for that. Something that can change the world, so I know that it isn't just an illusion. The *AURYN* is exactly that."

As I stretch out my arm to touch the amulet, a flat voice comes from behind me, cold and emotionless like a breath of icy air. "Your imaginary friend is right: The amulet is dangerous!"

Startled, I turn. In the entrance to the room is an enderman. He wears a white doctor's coat. At the end of his long arm, he holds a syringe.

"Go away!" I want to shout it, but I feel as if someone is strangling me, so my words come out as a croak.

"Give up, Marco!" the enderman says. "Give in to your fate! The more you fight it, the worse it gets for you."

I finally get back my voice. "Ha! You would like that, wouldn't you?"

The enderman takes a step toward me. "I only want to help you, Marco! Please believe me!"

The glowing eyes paralyze me. It is very difficult to raise an arm in the direction of the amulet.

"No!" Plato cries. "Don't do that!"

"He's right, Marco!" the enderman whispers. "It's much too dangerous!" The arm with the needle thrusts toward me. I can barely jump aside to avoid it.

"Begone, you epitome of Tartarus!" Plato shouts. He draws his sword and attacks the enderman, who only emits a hoarse laugh. He touches the philosopher with his arm, making him drop to the floor.

"Plato!" I want to help him, but the enderman stops me.

"Forget the old man. He's been dead more than two thousand years."

"You evil bastard!" I shout.

The enderman comes nearer. "Yes, swear as much as you want, Marco, if it helps you. And then give in to me!"

"Never!" I try to grab the amulet, but I don't have a hand, and it doesn't interact with my Cubeworld body like the other objects. I can neither touch it nor take it into my inventory. It's a foreign object in this universe, an illusion.

"What's wrong?" the enderman asks sardonically. "Do you have a problem?"

I walk around the statue, keeping it between me and my enemy. "Leave me alone, you monster!"

What can I do? Attack the enderman? But what he did to Plato indicates that he's much stronger than any ordinary Minecraft mob.

In my desperation, I get an idea. Instead of the sword, I get my pickaxe out and swing it at the statue. On the first touch, it shatters, forming a light gray block that materializes in my mind. But the amulet doesn't drop to the floor. Instead, it stays in place, hovering in the air.

"Go ahead!" the enderman laughs. "Take it if you can!"

Stretching out my arm still doesn't have any effect. But there's another way to get it around my neck: I step exactly into the spot where the statue stood, so that the amulet hangs on my breast.

Suddenly, there are two horizontal gray bars hovering in the air before me. They are translucent, so I can see the enderman behind them. On the upper bar there's an inscription reading, "Game mode: Survival." The lower one reads, "Back to Game."

The enderman freezes. "Careful, Marco! You're about to make a big mistake!"

I reach out with my arm. There's a click, and the inscription on the upper bar changes to "Game mode: Hardcore."

"Watch what you're doing!" the enderman says, sounding nervous. "It's dangerous to fiddle around with the options!"

I click a second time on the bar, making it read "Game mode: Creative."

"Don't do that!" the enderman pleads.

I click on "Back to Game."

The bars vanish. A pixelated symbol of the amulet appears in my mind, next to the pickaxe I'm still holding. I can feel the heavy metal on my chest. It is warm, pulsing slowly, like a second heart. As I check my inventory, my hopes are confirmed: There's an unlimited supply of every

kind of material, block, and item that exists in the game at my disposal.

"What did you do?" It's not the enderman who says that, but Plato, who's up on his legs again.

"We're now in creative mode," I explain triumphantly. "This idiot can't harm us anymore!" To prove it, I hit the enderman with the sword. He vanishes with a plop.

"And what's happening now?"

Hm. It's a good question. We were looking for something that couldn't exist in the Minecraft world. I had hoped that if we found it, the illusion would shatter, and I'd be back in reality. No doubt the *AURYN* doesn't belong in this world, but I'm still here.

"Apparently, we're not yet finished here," I conclude. "But at least, we don't have to be afraid of giant spiders anymore!"

"What makes you so sure?"

"In creative mode, I can change the world as I like. I have all the blocks and items in my mind that exist. The mobs in the Cubeworld can't attack me. Doors and walls are no barriers anymore, not even if they're made of bedrock. I can even fly!"

"So you think you're a God. A dangerous delusion indeed!"

"It's not a delusion!" I raise my arm to demonstrate it to him. One of the bedrock blocks in the far wall disappears. But as if I have triggered a chain reaction, one after the other, all the other blocks dissolve as well, like bursting soap bubbles.

After a few seconds, everything is gone: the room we were in, the pressure plates, the winding staircase, the stone face, the cave of the giant spider. Instead, I'm

standing on an empty plane, dotted with green pixels, that stretches endlessly in all directions. Above me, cubic clouds move slowly across the blue sky. The square sun is almost directly above me.

Alarmed, I look around. Plato is gone, together with everything else.

A thought is enough to lift me into the air. From high above, I have a better view, but there's nothing to see but an endless, empty, green plane.

I'm completely alone.

What have I done! Instead of getting closer to my goal, I'm farther away from it than ever!

Maybe instead of creative mode, I should have chosen hardcore. Then I would have had only a single life. If a monster defeated me, I'd be dead for good - like in reality. Instead, I turned myself into a God! How could I ever think that this would help me?

I try to activate the amulet so I can change the game options again. But whatever I do, nothing happens. The *AURYN* now is nothing but a pixelated, useless item in my inventory, only useful as decoration.

Again, Plato was right. Why didn't I listen to him?

Anger rises within me. Anger against myself, because I didn't heed my teacher's advice. Fury at Dr. Johanson, who made me flee into this dream world. Most of all, rage at Amely's stepfather for what he did to her, and to me.

My anger grows, until in frustration I stamp with my feet. Or at least that's what I want to do. In the Cubeworld, the result is that I'm jumping a dozen feet into the air.

When I hit the ground, there's a tremendous bang. A dent appears in the ground, spreading in a circle around me like a shockwave. The farther the wave travels, the higher it gets. Instead of a flat plane, it leaves irregular, uneven terrain behind, which tears open in some places, revealing earth and stone blocks. As the wave finally subsides, I'm not standing on an empty plain anymore, but in a rolling landscape of low hills. In the distance, my eruption of anger even created a chain of mountains.

Wow!

I jump another time. Again, there's a wave, deforming the landscape, but this time, the effect is not as big. The hills change a little, some of them getting larger, others diminishing. In places, cracks and crevices open up.

Rising up in the air, I can see that the waves have changed the land as far as I can see. But still, there's nothing but grass blocks, interspersed with stone and earth. I've achieved nothing but a few irregularities.

I float down again, select an oak sapling from my limitless inventory, and place it on an earth block. Immediately, a full-grown oak appears, ten blocks high. More than that, everywhere around me, oaks pop up from the ground. As I lift myself into the air again, I can see the wood spreading in a ring around me, as if the hilly landscape was suffering from a strange epidemic. Only the steepest mountains remain untouched.

Interesting! Maybe I should suggest to Notch that he includes this turbo creative mode in a future version of the game.

I float through the air until I see a deep valley that's filled with oak trees. Sinking deeper, I place a block of water between the trees. Within seconds, the water floods the surroundings. The trees disappear as quickly as they grew. For a second, I'm afraid that the whole world will be covered by a giant ocean. But the water only fills the areas lower than the block of water I placed. Soon, the hills and mountains are surrounded by a large sea. In the distance, I can see islands or continents. At the coastline, narrow sand beaches have formed.

Flying low over the young world, I place saplings, flowers, and grass seeds here and there. The plants spread, mixing with each other, but they're not evenly distributed:

In some places, woods dominate the landscape; others are covered by large stretches of grassland. When I place a cactus cube on one spot, a sand desert forms around it immediately. Soon, the whole world is split into biomes, very similar to the Minecraft world when a new game is started.

At last, I place some mobs, or to be exact, the appropriate spawner eggs: cows, pigs, sheep, chickens, wolves, ocelots, horses, squids. Each time I put down an egg in a biome in which the specific mob occurs naturally, a whole herd of them materializes, spreading out into the environment. If instead I place the egg in the wrong biome, only a single mob appears, looks around as if confused, and then runs off in search of a better-suited habitat.

For a while, it's fun to play God. But finally I run out of ideas. I have placed all kinds of blocks by now; putting down more of them doesn't change the world very much anymore. There are living beings scurrying around everywhere. I even spawned some villagers, who started erecting houses right away. Monsters are the only beings I didn't create, but they will appear on their own anyway, as soon as night falls.

As the sun goes down, I fly over the landscape at great speed. Indeed, skeletons, zombies, creepers, spiders, and endermen spawn out of the empty shadows everywhere.

During the whole night, I fly around without a goal. Once in a while, I see a light in the distance. When that happens, my heartbeat quickens in hope, until I fly nearer and find a patch of lava to be the cause, or a village with inhabitants about as smart and talkative as cows.

At dawn, I sink down at the coast of a large sea, disappointed. There's no point in continuing to search. This

world is endless. There are probably millions of villagers living here, but not a single one I could have a decent discussion with. Plato, the only friend I had in this world, is gone for good.

I regard the *AURYN* in my inventory. Seeing it fills me with the same deep anger that I felt before. With a single thought, I cast the useless item out of my mind, into the sea. With a soft splash it sinks into the depths.

For a while, I stare at the spot where it vanished. Finally, I turn away and try to lift myself up in the air, but that suddenly doesn't work anymore. As I inspect my inventory, it is completely empty, the endless supply of blocks suddenly gone. Apparently, the *AURYN* wasn't as useless as I thought!

Well done, Marco! First I switch into creative mode, locking myself in this world forever, then I throw away the amulet and kick myself back into survival mode, without having accomplished anything at all! It's quite an achievement, making two mistakes of such stupidity in a row!

I jump into the sea and dive down in search of the amulet, but my supply of air is limited, and the ocean is surprisingly deep. Each time I try to find the *AURYN*, I drown and respawn at the beach.

Finally, I give up. The amulet is irretrievably gone, and with it my powers to change the world. Lost and lonely, with an empty inventory, I stand on a small patch of sandy beach, at the shore of a sea of cubes. To the left, a flat hill rises terrace-like in orderly green steps. Trees with black-and-white pixelated stems are growing there, their leaves forming tidy cubes.

Wait a minute!

I look around, as if seeing my environment for the first time. I have been here before! More than once, actually. This is the exact spot where I found myself when I woke up in the Cubeworld for the first time, without knowing who I was and how I got here!

But how can that be? How can I have come to this spot by chance, in a world that I just created myself? Or maybe it isn't chance at all? Is there some kind of hidden meaning behind all the things that happened to me until now? I wish Plato was here! He might have an answer. Although, if he had one, I know he wouldn't tell me. He would instead ask me to look for the answer myself. So that's what I'm going to do: I'll explore this world and find a way out, however long it will take me!

Apparently, I'm at the beginning of my journey once again. Maybe, together with Simon, I have to find the room with the levers again, talk to Death himself in the city of the undead, defeat the Wither, ride the Enderdragon. Or maybe something completely different is waiting for me this time.

Whatever it is, I will take on the challenge: for Amely, for Mom, for my friend Kaden, for myself. I will hunt down the enderman and send Amely's stepfather to jail. Whatever fate and my subconscious will throw at me, I won't let it stop me!

Filled with fresh hope, I jump up the hill. This may be the beginning of a long journey through a world full of dangers. But it could be worse: At least, I'm not stuck in some bizarre nightmare or in a silly jump 'n' run, but in the best computer game in the world!

TO BE CONTINUED.

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At first, everything seems all right

when Marco wakes up from his coma and is finally allowed to go to school again. But where is Amely, who should have long since been back from her vacation? And why is he having strange visions of Minecraft time and again? As he struggles to keep his grip on reality, Marco finally realizes there is only one way to solve these mysteries: He must go back into the Cubeworld ...

Back into the Cubeworld is the sequel to Karl Olsberg's best-selling novel *Cubeworld*. Recommended for ages 12 and up.

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